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DRAKE'S DECEPTION
Naughty Dog pushes PS3 to its limits
with 2011's most explosive adventure
THE EDGE AWARDS
Featuring the best
games, studios and
tech of the year



2011
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HAPPY NEW YEAR!
TOSHIBA
TDK
All-New Sorento
KIA
HAPPY NEW YEAR
NEW YORK
News Corporation
NIVEA
Panasonic
TOSHIBA
YAHOO!
TOSHIBA
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Dark brown hair. Athletic – but not musclebound – build. A few days' worth of stubble around the chops. Unflashy, utilitarian clothing. Prone to staring off into the middle distance while contemplating escapades past and adventures ahead. In 2010 alone we've seen an estimated 139 games featuring heroic leads who fit this description, and yet there's only one Nathan Drake. It helps that this supposed descendant of Sir Francis Drake is given life by such exquisite animation, but unlike, say, good old Master Chief, Naughty Dog's hero is defined as much by his relationships with others as he is by what he looks like or his ability to shoot his way out of a sticky situation.

Non-interactive cutscenes may be the things against which purists have always liked to rail (we've certainly done enough of that in our time), but the narrative sequences that sandwiched the realtime meat in *Uncharted 2* brought a new level of storytelling fidelity to the action genre. And what of the incidental narrative tossed out during normal play? (It's a short-lived moment, but who doesn't recall the "There's a guy above you!" bit with a smile?) Drake's interactions with those around him, whether he's lunkily attempting to establish where he stands with the women in his life or cracking a throwaway one-liner, cement his development as a videogame character with *character*.

So it's a pleasure to see him return in *Uncharted 3*, a game in which he'll enjoy at least a small opportunity to distinguish himself in terms of appearance, too, thanks to a scarf that should come in handy against the wind-scattered sand he'll be facing as he once more unravels a mystery across unexplored territory. Our quest to uncover the secrets behind his next adventure begins on p46.

By this time next year, Naughty Dog's latest production could be a contender for the game of 2011, but in this issue we're launching gongs in the direction of standout achievements from the past 12 months. The awards show begins on p78, but for reactions from the winners, including some thoughts on a year in gaming that has delivered three **Edge** 10s, visit our website (next-gen.biz).



Autodesk Games Insight

The Latest Scoop from Autodesk Media & Entertainment



> 3ds Max and MotionBuilder give us an efficient workflow that we really trust to help us get the job done. With the help of the Autodesk tools, we were able to create a huge amount of complex original content well within our production timeline.
>
> —Mohamed Gambouz
> Art Director
> Ubisoft Entertainment

***Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. Image courtesy of Ubisoft.**

Ubisoft uses Autodesk games technology to create *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood.*

In 2007, Ubisoft Montreal created a third-person action-adventure game named *Assassin's Creed*. The universal success of the top-selling, award-winning game led to the creation of *Assassin's Creed II*, which saw present-day protagonist Desmond Miles reliving the genetic memories of ancient assassin Ezio Auditore da Firenze. The second installment also proved a huge success.

Now, the Ubisoft team has raised the bar again for *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, an ambitious new entry in the evolving story of the assassin that is the first to include a multiplayer mode.

Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood picks up where the second installment concluded, with players being reintroduced to both Desmond and Ezio, who has now become a Master Assassin and moved to the much larger city of Rome. Ezio's mission has also grown in scope and responsibility, as he attempts to build a brotherhood of assassins to vanquish the evil Templar Order and a new arch-nemesis, Cesare Borgia.

Ubisoft artists and engineers used the powerful combination of Autodesk® 3ds Max® and Autodesk® MotionBuilder® software, together with Autodesk® HumanIK® animation middleware in the company's proprietary game engine, to create the biggest *Assassin's Creed* title so far.

The Challenge

According to Ubisoft technical art director Danny Oros, the primary challenge from the start of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* was creating the ancient city of Rome. Nearly double the size of Florence, the scene of *Assassin's Creed II*, Rome significantly increased the scope and complexity of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*.

"Creating such a vast city was definitely a big challenge," says Oros. "Players have a lot more room to explore, and we had to make sure everything is as realistic as it is interesting. As Ezio and his fellow assassins help to rebuild Rome, players actually have the opportunity to change the city, to see it evolve through several distinct atmospheres. Players are essentially creating a new Roman renaissance through Ezio's actions and behavior."

Following hard upon the release of *Assassin's Creed II*, the Ubisoft team benefited from their continued use of Autodesk 3ds Max and Autodesk MotionBuilder software, and particularly Autodesk HumanIK middleware, which helped to create realistic character movement through the immense city, whether characters are walking on uneven terrain, scaling walls, jumping across rooftops, or fighting enemies.

"HumanIK middleware has been a part of our game engine for all of the *Assassin's Creed* titles," says Oros. "With it in our corner, we were confident that we'd be able to address all of our inverse kinematics challenges, more quickly and with no compromises in performance or results. That is a good feeling to have going into such a challenging project."

The Results

As Ezio recruits other assassins to his cause, the brotherhood of the title begins to grow more powerful, and their actions become more benevolent. Helping to free the Roman people from the Templar and Borgia's rule, the brotherhood goes about restoring the oppressed city to grandeur. As they do, the five districts of Rome clearly evolve through three distinct and compelling atmospheres.

"We created three different looks for each of the districts, pretty much all from scratch," explains Mohamed Gambouz, art director at Ubisoft. "3ds Max and MotionBuilder give us an efficient workflow that we really trust to help us get the job done. With the help of the Autodesk tools, we were able to create a huge amount of complex original content well within our production timeline."

Ezio's evolution into a Master Assassin is also revealed through a slew of ambitious and aggressive fight animations and character moves that are new in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. "Combo kills," for example, enable players to eliminate multiple enemies in a single deadly move. The Ubisoft team shot the new fight concepts using motion capture technology before bringing the data into MotionBuilder. The realistic fighting was then used to create the final animations in 3ds Max.

To learn more about Autodesk games software and middleware, visit **www.autodesk.com/games**.



***Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. Image courtesy of Ubisoft.**



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"I wanted the fame. I wanted the pretty girls to come up and say, 'Hi, I see that you're good at *Centipede*'."


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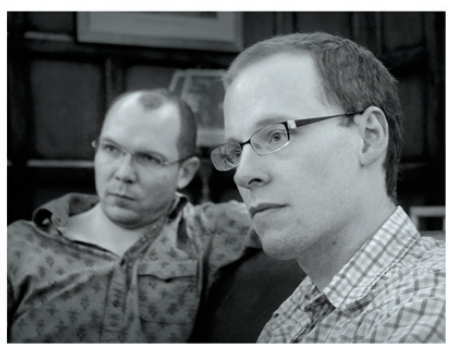
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START





HARDWARE

The motion revolution

The age of motion control has finally arrived on all three platforms. But what do new entrants Kinect and Move mean for gaming?

"Kinect has been easy to sell. We put it on the shop floor and, to be honest, it sells itself. We can't keep up with demand. Move stocks are also low – but it's bundled with every PS3 we're selling at the moment." We're talking to the store manager of an inner-city branch of a major UK videogame retailer (who wishes to remain anonymous), who's seen first-hand the impact of Kinect and Move's launches. "We're currently sold out of 360 hardware," he continues, "though we do have plenty of PS3s. I am very surprised with the Move sales figures, as the demand and interest isn't there at a shop-floor level. Kinect really has flown off the shelves, though."

"We put Kinect on the shop floor and, to be honest, it sells itself. We can't keep up with demand. With Move, the demand and interest isn't there at a shop-floor level"

The figures he's referring to are the numbers which Sony released at the tail-end of November, as part of an aggressive bout of press release one-upmanship between itself and Microsoft, and which tell a different story. Microsoft landed the first blow – announcing that, since Kinect launched in the US on November 4, it had managed to sell 2.5 million units worldwide. Mere hours later, Sony retaliated, announcing that it had shipped a total of 4.1 million Move controllers since its motion-sensing device launched two months previously. It's not a like-for-like comparison, of course – we don't, at the time of writing, know how many Move controllers have actually sold through – but combined, the contents and timing of these two announcements send out a powerful message. The motion revolution is off to a strong start, but who's going to come out on top? And what will the impact on gaming be?

Until recently, motion control meant Nintendo's Wii. And as successful as that console has been, its technical specifications and distinct user demographic swiftly marked it as a very different development proposition to the 360 or PS3. Now, with motion-tracking solutions available on all three consoles, motion-controlled games are competing on a more even playing field for developers' resources, as well as players' money and time.

But first, a closer look at those statistics. Microsoft's numbers, buoyed by strong sales over Black Friday weekend following Thanksgiving in the US, work out to an average of 100,000 units sold every day since launch. If sales continue at such a rate, it will put the company on track for its stated aim of selling five million units by the end of 2010. Sony's numbers, meanwhile, are harder to parse – actual sales figures will obviously be lower than



The high value of a Kinect sale (Microsoft's device costs £130 in the UK, while a Move Starter Pack is £50) could partly account for it receiving a bigger push at retail than Sony's PS3 offering






shipped numbers. Also absent from the statistics is the percentage of Move controllers sold as part of bundles with consoles, games, or more controllers – which some estimates have pitched as being as high as 75 per cent in the US. Sony's press release did make clear that it's not including sales of standalone Navigation Controllers or PlayStation Eyes, though unlike Kinect, Move sales statistics will in many cases reflect multiple purchases by the same consumer for multiplayer play.

But if our store manager is to believed, it's Kinect's launch which has made, in the UK at least, the bigger impact. If this trend is being repeated nationwide, what could be the explanation? The manager suggests a more successful public awareness campaign on Microsoft's part as one possible cause. "A lot of people are coming into the store just for Kinect," he explains. "[They] ask when we're getting stock in. A lot of PS3 owners don't even seem to realise Move is out, or what titles are released for it." The novelty value of Microsoft's technology is another factor: "Kinect is appealing to families. Younger kids love playing *Kinect Sports* in store and this sways a lot of parents to purchase. Move is harder to sell. A lot of people interested in it already have a Wii and aren't convinced by the titles available." He also identifies another, more surprising factor: "[My company] is putting a lot of effort into Kinect, not so much into Move. We were getting hammered about deposits for Kinect before launch. Although we did a pre-order campaign for Move, it was nowhere near the size of Kinect with regard to point-of-sale."




David Braben (left) is chairman of Frontier Developments, which produced Kinect launch title *Kinectimals* and has further motion-based projects in the works. Andrew Oliver is CTO of Blitz Game Studios, whose BlitzTech middleware offers support for both Move and Kinect

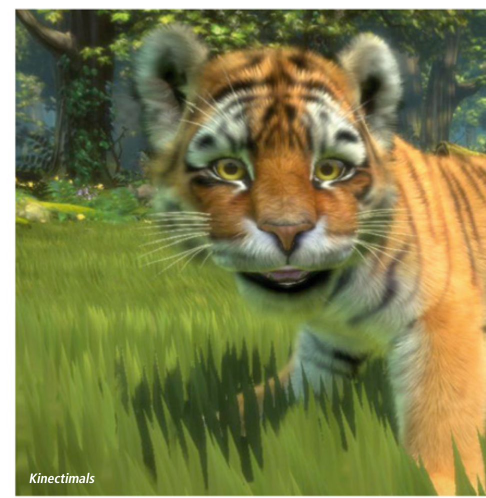
There's valuable positive PR in winning a sales war, but the outcome of the ongoing rivalry between Move and Kinect might have a more long-term effect. Format wars are a recurring part of both the technological and entertainment industries – is it possible that the choices made by consumers over the next few years will dictate the form that future motion-sensing solutions take?

"The systems don't have to be mutually exclusive," says **Andrew Oliver**, CTO of Blitz Game Studios, which, as well as having developed titles for Move and Kinect, also offers developers a middleware solution compatible with both devices in the form of BlitzTech. "Some games will thrive with the controller-free Kinect setup," he continues, "while others will more suit the Move wand, just as there will always be some games that will remain pad-based. If there does turn out to be a 'winner', then it'll be because of the content."

And that content, according to Oliver, is set to benefit from the variety of motion-sensing options available to developers. "[There will be] more diversity in the games available," he says. "We'll see fewer games being ported straight to different consoles, looking and playing much the same." With increasing costs having lowered the financial viability of exclusives this generation, the fact that games designed around a platform's unique hardware and peripherals are exclusive by default will be increasingly attractive to platform holders.

The launch of both systems has, according to Oliver, created a renewal in interest in development. "We've definitely had a spike of interest in our middleware since Kinect and Move launched," he says. "I think a lot of developers have concentrated on core gamers up to now, because that's who they are and what they've generally made in the past, but now everyone can see the new kinds of games that are possible with motion control."

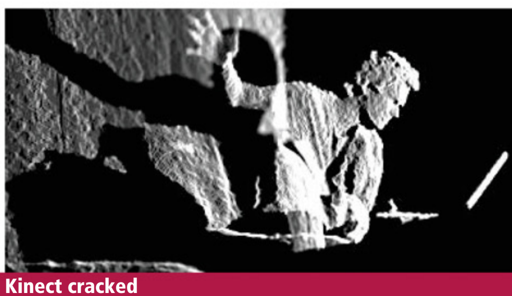
The distinction Oliver draws, between titles for core gamers and those who enjoy motion



Kinectimals



Sports Champions



Kinect cracked

Coders move quickly to get motion sensor working on PC

It wasn't long after Kinect's launch before enterprising programmers bypassed Microsoft's security safeguards and managed to get Kinect working on PCs. It didn't take much more time before some interesting applications started to emerge. While the gaming applications of these hacks aren't always obvious, all are intriguing. Some, such as Kyle McDonald's Point Cloud app (above), or Oliver Kraylos' 3D Video Capture, build a 3D image out of what Kinect can see. YouTube user Yankeyan, meanwhile, has developed software which allows users to 'teach' Kinect how to recognise objects – by presenting Kinect with an object and stating its name, Kinect will associate that name with the object next time it's shown. Finally, Vimeo user flight404 has used Kinect to distort and morph his own image into a strange human/marshmallow hybrid.



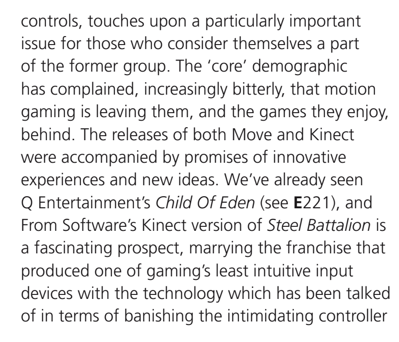






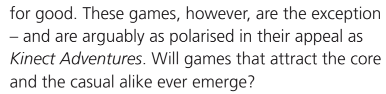


controls, touches upon a particularly important issue for those who consider themselves a part of the former group. The 'core' demographic has complained, increasingly bitterly, that motion gaming is leaving them, and the games they enjoy, behind. The releases of both Move and Kinect were accompanied by promises of innovative experiences and new ideas. We've already seen Q Entertainment's *Child Of Eden* (see **E**221), and From Software's Kinect version of *Steel Battalion* is a fascinating prospect, marrying the franchise that produced one of gaming's least intuitive input devices with the technology which has been talked of in terms of banishing the intimidating controller





for good. These games, however, are the exception – and are arguably as polarised in their appeal as *Kinect Adventures*. Will games that attract the core and the casual alike ever emerge?



"I think it all essentially comes down to a Venn diagram," says **David Braben**, whose Frontier Developments produced Kinect launch title *Kinectimals*. "What Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo has given us are very capable platforms, and it's really up to us as games designers to come up with good uses for them. Some genius designs will work across all sorts of audiences. There's an analogy in film, some clever films bridge a similar gap. Look at some of the humour in Toy Story – it appeals to adults and children in different ways. I think there's space for games to work on multiple levels, too."

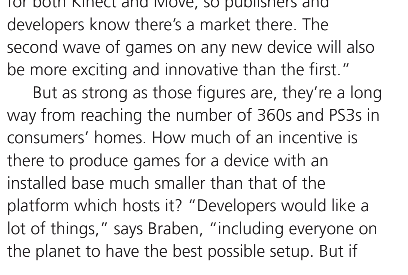
Oliver is equally positive in outlook. "I think everyone's been keen to chase the very large casual market initially," he argues, "so the focus has been on those types of games. But I'm absolutely sure that we'll see more games with core appeal soon."

With two rigidly defined userbases which rarely overlap, however, will anyone be prepared to take a risk in developing a game for both? A game designed to appeal to everyone could easily become a game that appeals to no one, after all.

"Doing anything new is risky," Braben argues. "I remember 20 years ago people saying there's only four genres, then there's only five genres, and every few years it would go up a genre [laughs], because someone had taken a risk and gone into a

"People are now starting to appreciate the benefits of motion control and get excited by its potential. Publishers and developers know there's a market there"

new space. It's often those games which are in particular a success." Oliver, meanwhile, suggests these games might tap into the under-utilised power of the hardware itself. "People are now starting to appreciate the benefits of motion control and get excited by its potential – the hack videos show just some of the potential [of Kinect]," he says. "The sales figures are also very healthy for both Kinect and Move, so publishers and developers know there's a market there. The second wave of games on any new device will also be more exciting and innovative than the first."



But as strong as those figures are, they're a long way from reaching the number of 360s and PS3s in consumers' homes. How much of an incentive is there to produce games for a device with an installed base much smaller than that of the platform which hosts it? "Developers would like a lot of things," says Braben, "including everyone on the planet to have the best possible setup. But if we do something that's absolutely compelling, more people will buy into it. Installed base is always a challenge when a new platform comes along."

Now that every console currently available has a motion-control option, will Microsoft and Sony's next iterations of hardware follow the example set by the Wii and come motion-ready out of the box? Microsoft has strongly implied it will be integrating Kinect, or its successor, with future Xbox hardware. It's easy to imagine some responding to such a suggestion with dread – but it's worth remembering that this generation's embracing of motion control has been a grand, unexpected experiment, and to consider the potential for both designers and hardware manufactures to analyse and build on the results.

"I'm absolutely sure that motion sensing will be a part of any new offering," says Oliver. Braben, however, is less certain: "Who knows what will happen? With all this it depends on the games. We've got to make great games for these platforms right now." In our next issue, we'll be taking a look at some of the processes involved in working towards that goal.

The critical lists

Which motion-based games have picked up the plaudits?

Forget sales of hardware, what about quality of software? Sifting through the Metacritic aggregate scores of the purely motion-controlled games in Move and Kinect's current lineups suggests a reasonable reception for the software available for both systems, though *Dance Central* is the only game currently enjoying an 80+ mark. Minigame collections are popular – and both systems' virtual pet games have also done well. The lack of single 90+ aggregate score for either system is a problem which Sony and Microsoft will both be anxious to address.





MOVE
- **Sports Champions: 76**
- **Tumble: 74**
- **Eyepet: Move Edition: 71**
- **The Shoot: 60**
- **TV Superstars: 59**

KINECT
- **Dance Central: 82**
- **Kinectimals: 74**
- **Your Shape: Fitness Evolved: 73**
- **Kinect Sports: 72**
- **Kinect Adventures: 61**

Source: metacritic.com, December 6, 2010

INTERVIEW

A game of soldiers

We talk to Codemasters about the tension between realism and escapism in the Operation Flashpoint series

Operation Flashpoint is a series known for taking war seriously. Its one-shot, one-kill weapons, and emphasis on teamwork, mark it apart from other takes on armed conflict. We talk to **Sion Lenton**, the creative director of *Red River* (see p30), the latest instalment in the series, about the difficulties of depicting war, and why too much realism isn't a good thing.

When does something become too much of a realistic simulation?
I don't want *Flashpoint* to be a military simulator; to me that's not what it is. Military simulations aren't games. They're engaging, but they're not necessarily fun. For me, it's about creating an experience that's authentic. It's about cherry-picking real elements. Bullet physics is a real element… but, for instance, with the gun handling, it was more important that we had good gun handling rather than the right gun handling, because the right gun handling doesn't necessarily translate well.

"It's a day's work for these guys, and that's the story. We're very much of the opinion that the job these guys do is exciting and interesting as it stands"

So what real elements have you sacrificed?
I think the inventory was the first thing to go. Instead of that, we've gone for more of a slot-based system and put more actions on the A button – healing, for example. In the last game, you had to open a menu, find your pack, get your pack in your hand and then heal yourself – it was too long. Take too long and you're dead. There were elements to the command radial and that were very realistic in *Dragon Rising,* but weren't very user friendly. We've rolled some of those options up in positions like 'defend' and 'suppress', and given more autonomy to the AI.

Also, I wouldn't say we've gone mad but, with the look of the game, there's a hint of stylisation in there. The lighting system is more… it's not how it really looks but how it could look if you were viewing it through a lens.

You've talked about trying to replicate the individual soldier's experience – is that something you think other games don't do?
No, I don't believe they do. It's Hollywood, it's completely the opposite of what we do. Our influences are Generation Kill and The Hurt Locker. We have a lot of conversations with the United States Marine Crops and they're looking over stuff. We're interested in reading actual embedded reporters' accounts.



Sion Lenton previously worked as executive producer on *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising*, but now holds the position of creative director on its sequel, *Red River*

I look at those other games and that's not what it's like. It might be what it's like for two per cent of the armed forces two per cent of the time, but for the other 98 per cent it's about sitting in the back of a helicopter, keeping your head and doing your job. To me, that's more interesting than a bombastic, Hollywood-style approach.

How do you settle on a fictional narrative which reflects contemporary warfare?
Flashpoint is set two to three years in the future, but we wanted to represent the kind of conflict people see on TV. Tajikistan seemed a natural place to do that, due to its proximity to these other areas – China, Afghanistan. But the actual story is based around military engagement – it's not one man's struggle, it's the fact you're a cog in a big machine, and the actual story of the game is the big machine. It's a day's work for these guys, and that's the story. We're very much of the opinion that the job these guys do is exciting and interesting as it stands.



There's no over-the-top one-man heroics here. The *Operation Flashpoint* series, which saw its first game, *Cold War Crisis*, released in 2004, prides itself on delivering an experience that reflects what soldiers really do, and demonstrates the amount of teamwork involved in war

Set in Tajikistan, *Red River* starts out in locations that appear similar to those found in other shooters, but it soon brings you back to its link with China

Do you think that using a fictional scenario might be playing it safe?
I think that's a good question. I, personally, don't want to focus on live conflict. I don't think it's appropriate and don't think it's tasteful. One of the girls who works here, her nephew was killed by an improvised explosive device [IED] a couple of months ago. So when I hear that, I don't want to be in a fucking meeting bigging up my IED tech.

But what do you do? Not make war games? I mean, we don't want that kind of controversy, we are deliberately setting out not to court that controversy, we don't want to go there and it's not a conversation that we ever wanted to get into. At no point did we think that it would be cool to set the game in Helmand or Afghanistan, because there's a war going on there and there are British soldiers dying. It's hard, as we're still making a war game, and showing soldiers dying, but I guess [the fiction] is us playing safe. But I don't have a problem with playing it safe when it comes to this kind of thing. That's my take on it.

Is that the reason for the absence of civilians from the franchise?
Well, there are technical strengths that lead to us not having them in here, but one reason we don't have them in there is because they wouldn't be around when there was conflict on. That's what really happens when insurgents move into an area – they clear the civilians out and you almost have the Marie Celeste-type village which literally is *too* quiet. One of the things we learnt was that it's very rare in this type of engagement to have civilians in there. It's not something we considered essential to the game.

But it's something soldiers sometimes have to worry about…
In all honesty, at the end of *Dragon Rising* we had a lot of work to do. We got good reviews and people liked the game, but there was also a lot of people calling stuff out, and so the idea of fixing those things was at the forefront of our minds. We knew we were going to put a new environment in, and that we wanted to pull in a third force, which was the insurgents. It's been quite an aggressive schedule, so if I'm being absolutely honest it's more time constraints than moral constraints for the lack of civilians. But, as I say, the original thought was that if we did have them in there, they'd be gone by the time stuff kicked off.

Can you capture the psychology of war in a game like this? And do you want to?
It's the psychology of war that fascinates me; it's actually the fact that these guys are just doing a job and they don't get scared about it. They get scared about making a mistake and their friend getting killed. That's what worries them the most. So it's the teamwork that's so important in the military that we're pushing for with our fourplayer co-op. That's teamwork – you and your squad working closely together.

Newswire

Xbox 360 hacking case dismissed

After a rocky start which saw a US judge express "serious concerns about the government's case" before delaying proceedings, the first prosecution for modding Xbox 360 consoles to play pirated games has been dismissed… by the prosecution.

Californian Matthew Crippen was accused of copyright violation after being filmed secretly. But when witness testimony came too late (and wasn't echoed in prior written reports), prosecutor Allen Chiu moved to dismiss the case as the government had made errors in its prosecution.





The Wright stuff

The director of Scott Pilgrim Vs The World explains how he brought authentic game culture to Hollywood

From Somerset to Sunset Boulevard, from Cornettos to *Castlevania*, writer-director **Edgar Wright** may have made the leap to the big time, but he's not forgotten the 8bit glory days. With his movie adaptation of the comic book series Scott Pilgrim Vs The World he lets videogame iconography, finally, off the leash, crash-zooming, fast-cutting and side-scrolling his way through gaming history without a break for afternoon tea and biscuits.

We catch up with the geek who conquered Hollywood to talk ZX Spectrums, PlayStation addictions and how he dealt with the old videogame-to-silver-screen conundrum.

How much of your attraction to the project was down to the videogame references in Bryan Lee O'Malley's comic books?
I loved that Bryan tweaked the reality of his universe so that videogame physics and laws would hold true, but it was the characters and story that really attracted me.

Why do you think so many videogame-to-film translations have gone so horribly wrong?
Well, probably because Scott Pilgrim is not based on an actual game, it means that we could appropriate all the iconography of videogames that film adaptations leave out. The immersive side of gaming can never be fully realised in a movie, but we didn't have that problem. Most of those movies jettison all the classic graphics, structure and effects to legitimise themselves, but we didn't have to worry about that, so we had a ball.

You've taken a very literal approach to translating the visual look and beats of games to film, with jump-cuts, zooms, etc, but how difficult is it to balance style and substance?
The easy way of looking at it was that this movie is the one playing inside Scott Pilgrim's head. So imagine the level of reality is the same as a young person who is living in a daydream. That said, the balance was tricky, especially dealing with the first fight and its aftermath.

"Games have forever riffed off movies. Sometimes it works, like the original Resident Evil, which perfectly nailed that feeling of being stranded in Romero's universe"

Gaming's influence can be traced throughout your work, going back to references to *Resident Evil 2* and *Tomb Raider* in Spaced, but what do you think of the recent trend in games to riff on film tropes and iconography? Do you think it's healthy that games like *Heavy Rain*, *Alan Wake* and *Deadly Premonition* take such extreme inspiration from movies?
I feel like games have forever riffed off movies.


Universal's Scott Pilgrim Vs The World took $10.5 million on its first weekend in cinemas across the United States. The movie will be released on Blu-ray and two-disc DVD in the UK on December 27





Sometimes it works gloriously, like the original *Resident Evil* game, which perfectly nailed that joyous feeling of being stranded in Romero's universe. But I guess there are also a lot of more generic games too that don't have much new to offer. I tend to be more impressed by games that are more otherworldly, like *Katamari Damacy*.

Most of the game references in Scott Pilgrim are '90s Japanese games, and the comic-book series is also very derivative of Japanese manga, so would it be fair to say that Scott Pilgrim plays homage to the east as much as American coming-of-age movies?
I think that's very true. Bryan channelled his love of manga, anime and older videogames into this rites-of-passage story. I'd been an anime fan going way back to Battle Of The Planets – or Gatchaman – so it was a thrill to work with the source material and feel completely unrestrained by the real world.

There's a nostalgia to the references in the film – do you miss the days of 8- and 16bit gaming?
I guess that's just an age thing. I'm 36 so I grew up in the age of the classic arcade machines and the ZX Spectrum. I spent the most time playing games in my pre-teens. I actually lapsed from gaming

OUT THERE



FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT

While most politicians are slowly waking up to the popularity of videogames, a political party in Spain was perhaps overly keen to harness their power ahead of elections in November. *Rescue*, a game all too quickly removed from the conservative Popular Party's website, portrayed party candidate Alicia Sanchez-Camacho as 'Alicia Croft', who bombs illegal immigrants while riding a white seagull. Naturally, the resulting accusations of racism and cultural insensitivity meant that the Popular Party completely got away with the lousy animation and derivative design.









The movie's game references can be hugely literal, but if you're looking for something more interactive, there's always Ubisoft's *Scott Pilgrim* on XBLA/PSN



Wright (left) on the set of Scott Pilgrim Vs The World with Michael Cera, who plays the lead role

right after Spaced. The PlayStation was getting to be a black hole of productivity, so I knew I had to get it out of the house if I were ever to write a screenplay. So you have Shaun Of The Dead to thank for me stopping gaming for a long while.

Do you think any game series in particular lends itself to being turned into a movie?
I'm not sure. I don't think film can ever replicate the unique thrill of gaming. But cut to 20 years from now and perhaps James Cameron will figure out a way we can all be in Avatar for real.

To round things off, how about telling us your five favourite games of all time? And what about the best game you've played this year?
Oh, wow. Forgive me for going way back, but I'll try and come up with the five games that meant a lot to me growing up. *3D Monster Maze* on the ZX81. *Elite* on the BBC Micro. *Knight Lore* on the ZX Spectrum – actually, all of the Ultimate games were amazing. *Sonic The Hedgehog* on the Mega Drive. And *Resident Evil 2* on the PlayStation. I've only played one game this year, and I'm biased, but Ubisoft's *Scott Pilgrim Vs The World* game was terrific.



The Dark Link is in the details

A trainspotter's guide to game nods in Scott Pilgrim

This is the official list of every direct game reference that appears in Scott Pilgrim Vs The World, as relayed to us by Universal Pictures (for further, less title-specific gaming references in the movie, see **Edge**'s website).

The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past/Four Swords
■ The movie opens with the music from *A Link To The Past* coming from Young Neil's DS
■ *Zelda* fanfare
■ The Great Fairy Fountain Song
■ 'Defeated enemy' sound effect
■ The logo on G-Man's shirt looks like an upside-down version of the Triforce
■ Nega Scott, a dark version of Scott Pilgrim, looks similar to Dark Link

Bomberman
■ In a flashback that shows Scott and friends playing a game, the 'Bomb Up' sound effect indicates that they are playing *Bomberman*

The Simpsons: Bart Vs The World
■ The name of the movie, Scott Pilgrim Vs The World, has a similar title to the 1991 game *The Simpsons: Bart Vs The World*

Serious Sam
■ The Sex Bob-omb logo looks like a less angry version of Serious Sam's logo

Dance Dance Revolution
■ Scott and Knives play *Ninja Ninja Revolution*, obviously a parody of *Dance Dance Revolution*

Pac-Man
■ Scott babbles to Knives and Ramona Flowers about the history of Pac-Man's name, explaining that the character was originally named Puck-Man when it was first introduced into the North American market

Mario Bros series
■ Scott's band is named Sex Bob-omb, a reference to Mario's enemies

Super Mario Bros
■ The classic Fire Flower, Star and Mushroom from the *Super Mario* series appear in Scott's head

Street Fighter II
■ The "KO" sound effect is used, along with VS image to start a fight

Sonic And Knuckles
■ A band called Sonic And Knuckles features

River City Ransom
■ Each of the seven evil exes explode and turn into coins when they are defeated, which is similar to what happens to enemies in *River City Ransom*
■ Scott's fight in Benvie Tech has a striking resemblance to *River City Ransom*, with mention of "turf," familiar bosses (including one named Simon on the roof, complete with a chain-link fence on the edge) and the "BARF!" dialogue. The fight ends with saving a girl (Kim)

Final Fantasy IV
■ Scott plays the bassline for the battle theme used in the game
■ When Wallace finds Scott on the ground, he asks if he found out about Wallace saving over Scott's file in *Final Fantasy*

Sonic The Hedgehog
■ The 'ring' sound effect from *Sonic The Hedgehog* is played during Scott's confrontation with Todd Ingram backstage
■ 'Zone cleared' sound effect used
■ Scott's attempt to find out where the library is devolves into him asking Wallace about the cheat code for *Sonic 3*

Soul Calibur
■ Roxy Richter uses a segmented sword, similar to the one used by Ivy from the *Soul Calibur* series

Castlevania
■ Roxy's last name is Richter, a reference to Richter Belmont from the *Castlevania* series. Like Richter Belmont, she also uses a whip as a weapon

The Clash At Demonhead
■ The name of Envy Adams' band is The Clash At Demonhead, which is also the name of a 1990 NES game

Rock Band
■ During his battle against the Katayanagi twins, Scott is wearing a shirt that features the bass guitar icon from the *Rock Band* games

Mortal Kombat
■ Wallace Wells tells Scott to "Finish him!" in a similar manner to the announcer in *Mortal Kombat*

EarthBound
■ The final duel takes place in the Chaos Theater, the name of a location in *EarthBound*

Half-Life
■ G-Man has the same name as a recurring character in the *Half-Life* series

No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle
■ Gideon's beam katana looks similar to the one used by Travis Touchdown in *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*

The Secret Of Monkey Island
■ When Ramona and Knives fight in the library, Ramona tells Knives she fights like a cow. This is a quote from an insult swordfighting battle in *The Secret Of Monkey Island* involving Guybrush Threepwood and a pirate: "You fight like a dairy farmer!" "How appropriate. You fight like a cow"
■ Scott insults Wallace in the smallest box by saying: "I am rubber, you are glue!" While a generic response to an insult, it has appeared in *The Secret of Monkey Island* as an insult and retort. Bryan Lee O'Malley has stated that the insult was "kind of a *Monkey Island* thing"

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater
■ Scott's 'training' is playing *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* games

SOUND BYTES

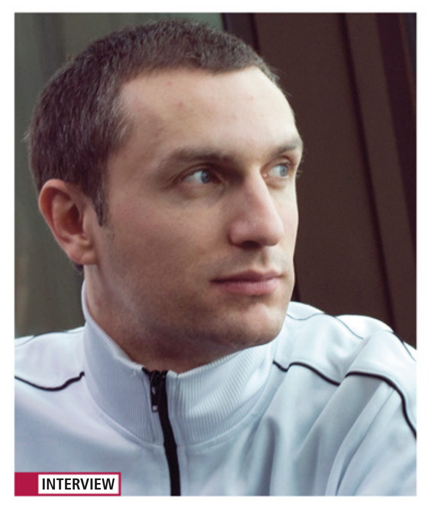
"Swery played *Nanashi No Geemu*, but was too scared to finish it ('I was worried that I might really end up cursed!')."
Chris' Survival Horror Quest piques our interest in the long-lost (and sadly untranslated) DS game that put the willies up the director of *Deadly Premonition*

"The core concept of this game from the beginning is life; the project code name from the start was in fact 'Inochi', which means 'life' in Japanese. The most distinctive way of differentiating a creature from a machine is 'life'. However, we also know that machines can be given a form of life when created by man. Is it possible that the differentiation is becoming less clear and machines are actually becoming more like humans?"
Toshihiro Nagoshi admits that his guns-and-robots actioner *Binary Domain* looks a bit like *Vanquish*

"At least for the moment, none of KJI's [Kim Jong-il's] three sons is likely to be tapped to succeed him. [Redacted] considers the two youngest sons, Kim Jong-chol and Kim Jong-un, far too inexperienced and incapable of effective governance. [Redacted], observing that KJI's oldest son, Kim Jong-nam, is 'too much of a playboy,' Kim Jong-chol is 'more interested in videogames' than governing."
Wikileaks suggests that THQ's *Homefront* could find a fan in the unlikeliest of places

"What the United States couldn't accomplish in more than 50 years, they are now trying to do virtually."
Cubadebate, a site backed by the Cuban government, doesn't take too kindly to *Black Ops*' attempt on Fidel Castro's life

"Kinect will also feature a bit more prominently at one Burger King. The Roppongi Burger King will host a special Kinect demo space from 12/8 to 12/17. Sample Kinect there, and you'll get a coupon for a Burger King purchase."
Andriasang lets Japanese readers know they can counteract calorie-burning with heartburn at their local fast-food joint


INTERVIEW


Based on a tweaked version of *Battlefield 2*'s engine, *Battlefield: Play 4 Free* will work on PCs with modest processors but still retain its good looks and expansive gameplay

EA's strategy for the free-to-play battlefield

Having shown us what we get for free with Battlefield Heroes, EA is striking a blow for gratis gaming with Battlefield: Play4Free

Following the announcement of *Battlefield: Play4Free* (see p35), **Ben Cousins** (above), the general manager of free-to-play for Electronic Arts, considers the free-to-play market, hardcore shooter fans' peculiar playing habits, and the publisher's success in the field.

After going in a new stylistic direction with *Battlefield Heroes*, why is EA now making a free-to-play game in a more traditional FPS mould?
What we did here was look at *Battlefield Heroes* and the free-to-play business model, and the audience who were playing those games – we know quite a lot about these people, and what other EA games they play, through market research and reading the forums. And *Heroes*, despite its cartoony sheen, actually attracts a very hardcore audience. A large portion of players – 75 per cent – describe themselves as hardcore shooter fans. We want those guys to still keep playing *Battlefield Heroes* – it's a very successful game for EA – but we thought, rather than just expanding on *Heroes*, why not give them a complementary experience where they can share the same account, and fulfil their desire for something firstperson, realistic, gritty, violent, modern and fast-paced?

Where did *Battlefield Heroes* make money? Was it mostly through in-game advertising or player-based transactions?
We actually aren't getting much from ad revenue at all. Almost all of our revenue comes from microtransactions. The in-game advertising


***Battlefield: Play4Free* is a return to the more realistic, gritty look of the series. How much will the pirate and Santa costumes be missed?**

business hasn't grown as fast as people expected it to. If you think about how fast the virtual goods business has grown in the last year or so, with Zynga and Facebook games, it's been much quicker and become a much more reliable source of revenue. We hedged our bets [with *Heroes*] – we thought we'd do in-game advertising and virtual goods sales, and one of those took off really fast and the other hasn't really taken off at all.

Do you see any kind of future for in-game advertising opportunities?
I think so, if done correctly. But I think it's more about specific deals where you can tie the content in. We did a deal with Dr Pepper for *Battlefield Heroes*, where if you buy a bottle and scan in the code you get an exclusive outfit. That kind of deep integration will work, I think, but I'm not convinced that we'll have billboards in games and things like that. Maybe those days are over. What we did with Dr Pepper was give something exclusive away for free – and maybe they buy that soft drink anyway. Consumers are much more willing to accept that than having a big advert in their face whenever they try to play a game.

Why would hardcore players choose a free-to-play shooter over their normal diet of HD console FPSes?
We actually did research into hardcore console shooter fans. We thought that this research was going to be introducing them to the idea of free-to-play shooters, but it turned out that they were already playing them. In the moments between sitting in front of their TV with their HD console, they move over to playing a free-to-play shooter, maybe in a break, or in their lunch hour, or just a different moment in the day. And because it's free, there's a very low barrier to entry. They'll play *Medal of Honor* constantly, but sometimes it will drive them crazy with frustration so they'll go over and play something else on the side. That's what we found. It was very interesting. We thought it would be an either/or thing as well, but actually it's a complementary experience.

How do you ensure that players commit to *your* free game?
Battlefield: Play4Free is unique in that we've got an in-depth RPG-like levelling-up system. Most [firstperson shooters] have unlocks and a vague idea of levelling, but we've got skill trees and the idea of building a unique soldier, so you start off with a regular greenhorn and you end up with a sniper specialist recon or a guy who just works on tank-busting and isn't so good in other areas. So it's more like MMO-like career progression. That's our real unique feature.

"If you think about how fast the virtual goods business has grown in the last year or so, it's been much quicker and become a much more reliable source of revenue"

Will you continue to support *Battlefield Heroes* after *Battlefield: Play4Free* launches?
Battlefield Heroes has six million registrations. By unique players, it's the most successful game in *Battlefield* franchise history, and it's EA's most successful play-for-free game – more successful than *Need For Speed*, *Tiger Woods*, *FIFA*, any of those titles. It's a big deal for EA, and we're not going to abandon it. These titles are complementary and will coexist.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

All that change we spent this month (see p64) has left our pockets empty but our heads buzzing for one more go. Operated by self-professed 'saviours of coin-op', Arcade Heroes scratches that itch nicely.

The site offers a comprehensive, global newsfeed for arcade lovers, collectors and addicts, detailing upcoming releases such as *Giant Tetris* (complete with a 47-inch screen) and *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*. And, as with any active arcade scene, there's a strong sense of community, with fans regularly chipping in chart translations and fuelling the forum's fires with tales – and pictures – of arcade cabinet relics. We'll certainly be using it in planning our next coin-op expedition.


Site:
Arcade Heroes
URL:
www.arcadeheroes.com







INTERVIEW

The other Need For Speed

If Hot Pursuit is the series' arcade racer, what is Shift? We talk with two of the men behind the upcoming sequel to find out

With Criteron's series reinvention *Need For Speed Hot Pursuit* fleeing the shelves almost as quickly as its speeding road criminals from the sound of sirens, what is *Need For Speed: Shift 2*'s place in the franchise, and in the racing genre? EA's executive producer **Marcus Nilsson** and Slightly Mad Studios' lead designer **Andy Tudor** tell us about their take on the simulation racer.

How does *Shift* fit into the wider *NFS* brand?
Andy Tudor: This is the simulation-style racer, like *Forza* or *GT*, the authentic racing experience; *Hot Pursuit* is already covering the action-orientated experience that people normally associate the *Need For Speed* name with.

As a simulation racer, then, how does *Shift 2* compete with *Forza* and *GT*?
AT: *Gran Turismo 5* will be a good game, eventually, if it ever comes out [Sony's game has since shipped – see our review on p90]. *Forza* and *GT* are like an encyclopaedia with 500 cars, cramming in as many tracks as possible. It's the equivalent of going over to *Medal Of Honor* and saying: "Look, we've got 500 guns." It's not really about that, is it? It's about making sure that one particular gun feels awesome and cool.
Marcus Nilsson: If you look at the racing sim category, it's quite stale. It's been stale for a long time. The games in that genre are innovating by numbers. I don't think that is a great lure to the consumer, to be perfectly honest. It's a number you can put on the box, and that will appeal to some people, but the way that I want to look at *Shift* as a franchise is that we are innovating at the core – behind the wheel. We want to innovate where it matters, and we think it matters in the second-to-second driving experience.

> **"The way that I want to look at Shift as a franchise is that we are innovating at the core – behind the wheel. We want to innovate where it matters**

Is there a spirit of competition between your team and Criterion?
AT: We're both eager for success, but there's been collaboration throughout – on things like Autolog, for example. [Criterion] had a great idea, we had a great idea, and we looked at each other and saw that it was the same idea. They pioneered it, but we're taking it to the next level.

What do you think of *Hot Pursuit*? How does Autolog change things for the genre?
AT: It's great. It's chase and escape in its purest form, and Autolog really extends the career and the multiplayer. It's a great back-and-forth between friends. We've all got very different lives – the chances of us all being online at the same time to play against each other are probably slim to none, but when I can see that you've beaten me on Thursday and I can spend a few hours trying to beat you when I finally sit down in front of my console on Saturday, that's perfect.
MN: *Hot Pursuit*, as the arcade *Need For Speed* title, is splendid. I love the handling; I love the Autolog integration – Autolog caters for such replayablility. It's something that we haven't really seen before in this genre.
AT: For a long time in games, we've had leaderboards, but being told that you're 100,000th in the world is not motivating in any way whatsoever. Focusing on friends – any game can benefit from that, not just racers.



Andy Tudor (left) is lead designer at *Need For Speed: Shift 2*'s developer, the London-based Slightly Mad Studios; Marcus Nilsson is an executive producer at publisher Electronic Arts

Continue

Desert Nathan Drake
Because you can never be *too* Indiana Jones

Internet overhauls
Stage one of the **Edge** website rejig: complete

Festive engagements
Gifts. Parties. Elderly people trying to understand Kinect

Quit

Console installs
Gran Turismo is supposed to be all about speed, no?

Jedward DS overload
Come back, Anthony and Declan – we beg you

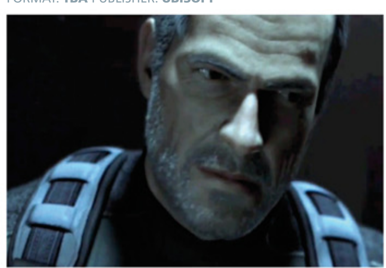
Movie Nathan Drake
Mark Wahlberg, then. Mark. Wahlberg.


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INCOMING

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 6

FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



You might expect a more clandestine operation from Sam Fisher, but a non-gaming article about working in Ontario blows the whistle: his next mission is under way at Ubi's Toronto studio

Halo: Combat Evolved

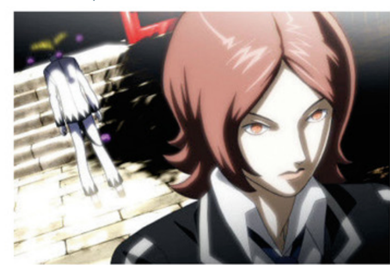
FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**



343 Industries is now helming the *Halo* franchise, and rumours abound that its first port of call will be a familiar one – remaking the game that began it all to coincide with the Chief turning ten

Persona 2

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS**



With a release date set for March 3, this will be the third PSP remake for the supernatural RPG series, leaving only *Persona 4* still marooned on PS2. A Euro release might take a spell longer

Test Drive Unlimited 2

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**



Games are big on choice nowadays – starting with where you buy them. Each retailer has a different car-shaped sweetener for those that pre-order Eden's open-world racer, due February 11

Warface

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



Known for spec-hungry shooters, Crytek's latest takes aim at the Asian free-to-play market – which is both traditionally low-spec and shooter-averse. Let's hope the striking name sells it to them

Inception

FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **TBA**



Pinch yourself: it's real. Director Chris Nolan has confirmed a return to the psychological sci-fi thriller – but in a game rather than a film sequel. No timescale as yet, but work is under way

Game Dev Story 2

FORMAT: **IPHONE** PUBLISHER: **KAIROSOFT**



A sequel to the hit sim is confirmed – the iOS port anyway: the game was released a decade ago on PC. There are improvements for iOS, though, with leaderboards and online interactivity

Dr Kawashima's Body And Brain Exercises

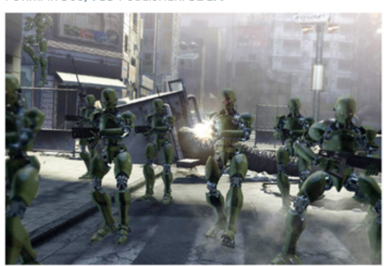
FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO BANDAI**



The polygonal polymath returns this February as a smooth-skinned Xbox Avatar – and this time wielding the power of Kinect in the war against intellectual and physical self-neglect

Binary Domain

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA**



Yakuza frontman Nagoshi is at the reins of Sega's newly revealed shooter in which a trio of gun-toting stereotypes take on oppressive robot warriors – which can't aim for toffee



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Steambirds: Survival

www.steambirds.com

A turn-based WWII dogfight game, the latest iteration of David Edery's *Steambirds* series is the most complete yet.

A rousing backing score and a kitschy-cool art style set the scene for *Steambirds*' engrossing mix of strategy and action. Battles take place on top-down maps annotated with objectives and some brief historical notes, striking a delicate balance between atmosphere and usability. Setting the course of your plane, deciding whether to shoot, shield or speed, is crucial against each wave of enemies, and it requires the careful approach to space and time that is essential to all great strategy titles. Pickups left behind by downed enemies provide an extra layer of complexity and can graduate your firepower from damaging to devastating.

In a shrewd move of self-promotion, links to Facebook and Twitter are embedded into the window and optional microtransactions open up new planes. It may be set in the past, but *Steambirds: Survival* is a portent of the monetised, socially connected future of Flash games.


16
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uk.playstation.com/Time-Crisis-Razing-Storm
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Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Why 2008 was the peak for boxed games sales

Piers Harding-Rolls examines the current and future performance of retail games

The traditional boxed games industry had a momentous year in 2008. The PS2 was still firing, the new generation of consoles was ramping up significantly, the Wii was opening the traditional console market up to a much wider demographic of users, and the newly enlarged handheld sector driven by the success of the DS Lite and Sony's PSP was helping drive the market to unprecedented heights. On top of the explosion in hardware sales, mainstream consumers were generally paying more for their games, as many came with bundled peripherals including *Wii Fit*, *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*. These factors combined to ensure that global revenues for packaged games reached a massive $30 billion in 2008, with another $20 billion at least spent on console hardware. Looking back now, I think it is clear that 2008 was the high point for boxed games sales and that we will never again see such high consumer spending on packaged games.

While the release of new TV consoles in 2013/2014 will grow the market again, I don't expect the new cycle to match the sales potential of the current cycle

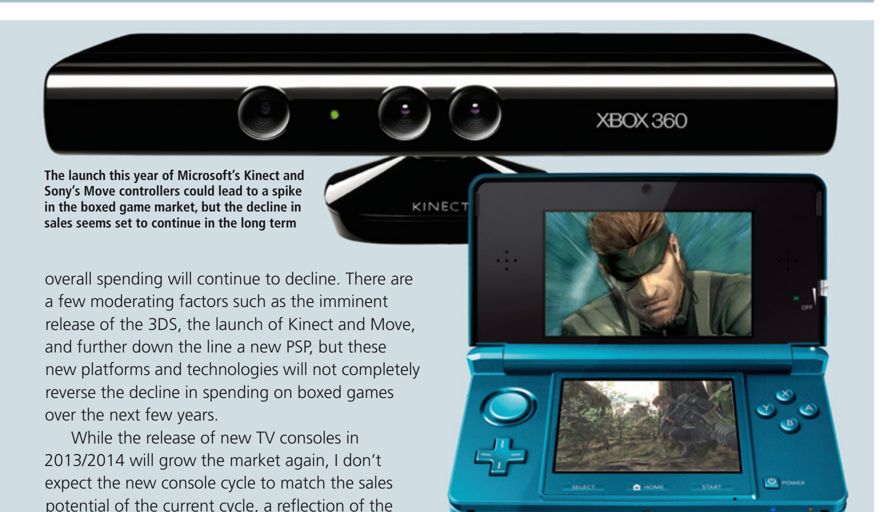
Since 2008 we've seen a steady decline in spending on games, with a fall of eight per cent last year, a forecast drop of around ten per cent this year from 2009 levels and further pain to come until the launch of new consoles in the 2013/2014 timescale (see chart). Like the great success of 2008, there is a combination of reasons why spending on boxed games is dropping away, and while we can point to the transition to digital games markets as central to a shift in consumer spending away from physical media and the emergence of a virulent pre-owned games market, the fact is a lot of decline can be explained by the natural lifecycles of games devices. So as much as we had strong performance of PS2 and handhelds in 2008, these platforms have dropped off considerably in the past couple of years. Likewise the great Wii sales explosion has been in steady decline and, as we are unlikely to get new consoles until at least 2013,



Nintendo's *Wii Fit* has shifted a lot of peripherals, but *Rock Band 3* sold only 212,000 copies on 360 worldwide in its first month, and 116,000 on PS3





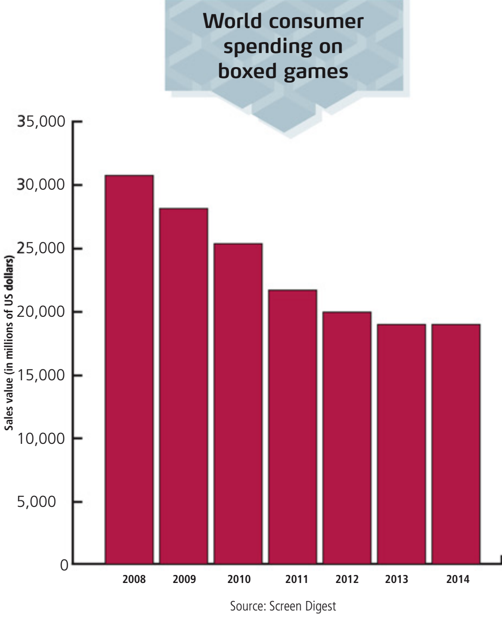


The launch this year of Microsoft's Kinect and Sony's Move controllers could lead to a spike in the boxed game market, but the decline in sales seems set to continue in the long term

Nintendo's 3DS, plus a new PSP from Sony to replace its creaking original tech, will see handheld gamers further adopting digital distribution, slowly pushing the door closed on boxed releases

overall spending will continue to decline. There are a few moderating factors such as the imminent release of the 3DS, the launch of Kinect and Move, and further down the line a new PSP, but these new platforms and technologies will not completely reverse the decline in spending on boxed games over the next few years.

While the release of new TV consoles in 2013/2014 will grow the market again, I don't expect the new console cycle to match the sales potential of the current cycle, a reflection of the increasingly competitive landscape for consoles in the living room, with increasing pressure on people's time and money from many new distribution channels and platforms. One significant factor poses a serious challenge: the console business can only grow if it extends its engagement to a wider section of mainstream users, as shown by late-stage PS2, the Wii, and Microsoft's current strategy with the Xbox 360. But the mainstream user is being increasingly engaged further up the content feeding chain by non-dedicated platforms and devices leveraging digital distribution and online service strategies. Thus we are seeing consumers exposed to games daily through contact with Facebook or through use of smartphones and iPods, undermining the traditional and established channel of mainstream users flowing to the consoles (and other online sectors like traditional portal-based casual games as well). As a result, the opportunity for specialist games platforms to engage mainstream users is now under increasing threat, and with it the potential of the traditional packaged games business in the next console cycle and beyond.







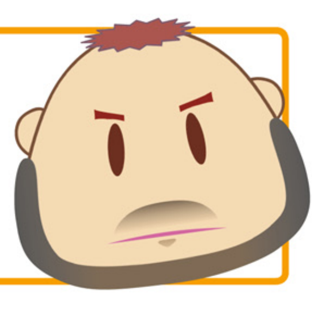
How to promote sales of boxed copies? Throw everything but the kitchen sink into elaborate and expensive special editions, perhaps

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

Weapons of moe destruction

Game producer Brick Bardo on how a manga character salved a war of words



Things are hotting up with Japan's neighbours. The clash between the two Koreas is just the latest and most unnerving of events – relations with Japan's friends elsewhere on the mainland have also been strained. There's been a tussle with Russia over the occupation of our northernmost islands, and a dispute with China over an island chain in the East China Sea. The subsequent seizure of a Chinese fishing boat led to mass protests of unusually strong feeling against Japan – racist placards, smashed windows, scuffles with the cops – the whole lot. One woman was ordered to strip naked because her dress looked like a kimono, while a (not untypical) banner offered this advice for the diplomats: "Take a Japanese wife, then string her up and beat her every day."

So, tensions are running high, to say the least. Our government has been seen as inert and spineless, doing visibly little to either retaliate or remedy the aggression. Apparently frustrated by the government's inaction in this war of words with our neighbours, otaku culture, of all things, has stepped up to the plate. With a cunning bit of linguistic trickery, the help of a cute manga girl and a dose of Google page-ranking savvy, they have diffused some of the hostility. Japanese geeks have helped the nation turn the other cheek.

It comes down to the words 'nihon onigo' – or 'Japanese devils' – a popular derogatory phrase that emerged (quite understandably) from the brutality of the Japanese Imperial Army as it waged war in China and Manchuria during the '30s and '40s. It's stuck ever since, and is still the term of choice for angry Chinese to slap on a banner or burning effigy. Or, rather, the written characters are. You see, although Japanese and Chinese speak different languages, they share much of the same writing system. Nihon onigo is written the same way in either country, but can be read in different ways. It's this ambiguity between written word and pronunciation that the otakus have exploited to change the words' meaning altogether.

The Chinese read the characters as 'riben guizi'. We in Japan can pronounce the kanji as either nihon onigo or nihon oniko, or, with a little creativity, hinomoto oniko. It's significant: the -ko suffix is associated with female names; girls are often called Hanako, Yukiko, Junko and any number of other -ko names. Hinomoto, meanwhile, sounds like a family name, translating to 'origin of the sun'. When the otakus of the infamous internet forum 2ch seized upon this, they realised they could, with a concerted effort, enact a linguistic coup to reinterpret the term and bury its negative connotations. They started to draw up designs of what this Hinomoto Oniko girl might look like. Soon, the internet was flooded with depictions of a manga nymphette with a horned mask in a swishing red kimono.

She's what's called a moe character – a subset

With a cunning bit of linguistic trickery, the help of a cute manga girl and a dose of Google page-ranking savvy, otaku have diffused some of the hostility from the Chinese. Japanese geeks have helped the nation turn the other cheek

of manga that applies a checklist of attributes: young, female, cute – though not overtly sexualised. But it's not simply what a character looks like that makes her moe – it's how she's used. Moe characterisation is often deployed as a sort of anthropomorphism or as a mascot. You can have a moe character that embodies the idea of a product or an emotion or an element – if you look at the Wikipedia entry for it, you'll see that the example illustration is of Wikipedia itself, personified in moe form: a girl in a maid's outfit with jigsaw-piece-shaped clips in her hair.

Though they are held to be quite ridiculous, saccharine and cheesy, moe girls have swept through otaku culture, and are used to sell everything from bubblegum to games. You have to understand how ubiquitous and benign they are to realise the significance of what 2ch's otakus achieved: taking a popular racist epithet and transforming it into a cutesy girl mascot. There are now YouTube videos of her singing and dancing to J-pop. China's otakus have been perplexed, to say the least, with forumites wondering just what they can call the Japanese instead.

It's not the first time otakus have batted away international tension with humour and, if I'm honest, some fairly dubious smut – amid the anti-Japanese riots in China and South Korea of 2005, photos were circulated of young actress Saaya Irie, captioned with a petition for the countries to cool down and get behind their shared love of hot girls. If everyone united "for the sake of China's democracy", it read, her breasts would "rise up". This latest moe rebuttal to racism has had far more traction (possibly because it didn't involve salacious photos of an 11-year-old in a bikini) and has been picked up by newspapers across Asia.

You have to applaud it. What other problems can otakus and moe girls solve? Perhaps a recession moe can help us keep a smile on our faces during these tough times; I picture her as a sexy school-ma'am with a clipboard graph showing the falling value of the yen. Or maybe the two Koreas can put aside their differences when instructed by a slightly singed mutually assured destruction moe. There are certainly storm clouds ahead for our corner of the world and it's easy to feel anxious – but it's heartening to know that, even if our government fails us, the geeks will help to see us through.


Gran Turismo 5


Tactics Ogre

Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales, November 1–28

Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales
1. ***Gran Turismo 5*** (SCEI, PS3): 410,486 (NE)
2. ***Tactics Ogre*** (Square Enix, PSP): 236,855 (NE)
3. ***Call Of Duty: Black Ops*** (Square Enix, PS3): 175,813 (NE)
4. ***Super Mario Collection Special Pack*** (Nintendo, Wii): 172,334 (575,500)
5. ***Pokémon Black & White*** (Pokémon, DS): 160,570 (4,456,872)
6. ***Super Robot Taisen L*** (Namco Bandai, DS): 123,933 (NE)
7. ***God Eater Burst*** (Namco Bandai, PSP): 120,980 (388,158)
8. ***Winning Eleven 2011*** (Konami, PS3): 105,556 (334,632)
9. ***Tongari Boushi To Mahou No Omise*** (Konami, DS): 86,554 (NE)
10. ***Mario Sports Mix*** (Nintendo, Wii): 84,940 (NE)


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Hype

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Dragon Age 2

It took a sequel to perfect *Mass Effect*'s formula, and BioWare's aggressive redesign of its bloody fantasy epic seems even bolder than that franchise's reinvention.
360,PS3,PC, EA

Pilotwings Resort



It's been nearly 15 years since *Pilotwings 64*, but a 3D bird's-eye view should make it worth the wait. We're getting all calm and peaceful just thinking about it.
3DS, NINTENDO

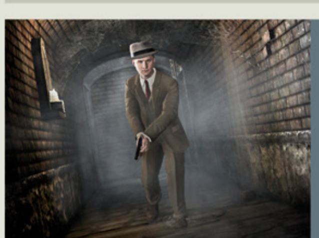
Rage



Its iPhone-based younger sibling has whetted our appetites for next year's post-apocalyptic main event, and we're eager to take the mutant bashing to a bigger screen.
PC, ID SOFTWARE

Use of deadly force

Ask questions first, shoot never?



It's a bit much to expect *LA Noire*'s Cole Phelps to fill out paperwork justifying each unholstering of his gun – but how different would the game be if the developers were forced to do so?

An idea that recurs over the course of our visit to see *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* is that simulation isn't fun. Dogged adherence to the weapons, strategies and tactics of modern warfare, we're told, simply doesn't make for an interesting game. So *Red River* preserves authenticity to a point at which it can still capture the drama of real-life soldiering, but is willing to sacrifice it for a fun and interesting game.

The reason *Red River* can have it both ways is that the reality of a soldier's life really is intense enough to accommodate the demands of an action game. True, Codemasters might skip the hours spent on guard duty, the potato peeling, and the boot polishing, but so long as its missions maintain a certain level of plausibility, it's easy to suspend disbelief.

LA Noire doesn't have things so easy. Its real-life source material – the sometimes seedy, sometimes bizarre crimes perpetrated by the citizens of '50s LA – doesn't naturally lend itself to epic gun battles. Its fictional inspirations are more accommodating in this respect, but they're still built around low-key, personal stories – in which the firing of every bullet has real dramatic weight. Team Bondi's facial animation has made the telling of such stories easier than ever before. More importantly, the developer has built much of its game around the aspects of a detective's work – searching for clues, etc – which not only lend themselves to small-scale drama, but which the majority of action games tend to overlook.

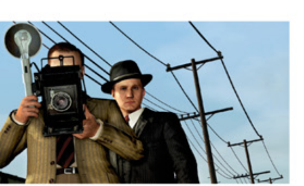
And then come the car chases, and the gunfights against generic, anonymous foes. These require both a tonal and mechanical shift – turning Cole Phelps from a noir adventure's leading man to a shooter's action hero. If the game earns these moments and creates situations in which a large-scale shootout can vary its pacing as well as making dramatic sense, then there's no reason why they shouldn't be a success. But this assumes that the kind of gunfight that players are used to is what *LA Noire* needs in the first place.

A detective's gun isn't just for show. But the firefights of *LA Noire*'s source material were rarely ground wars – they were duels, deadly and brief. Team Bondi makes battles of wit work in-game, but can a shootout be as intimate a fight?

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **TEAM BONDI**
ORIGIN: **AUSTRALIA**
RELEASE: **2011**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E213**

LA Noire

We unearth shocking new twists in Rockstar's detective thriller





When investigating evidence, Phelps can turn items in his hands using the sticks. While the camera zooms in to highlight points of interest, important details tend to stand out: key phrases in letters are written in a slightly lighter shade of ink



A hungover, pained smile. Simpering politeness. Resigned disappointment. A grin so smug you genuinely want to tear it from its owner's face. These things are beyond the abilities of most videogame casts, which more often than not find blinking something of a bother. It's been nine months since we last saw *LA Noire*'s facial animation – and it's just as striking the second time around.

It's not that the uncanny valley's been bridged – its shadow can be found in the as-yet-impossible-to-replicate details of a person's skin tone and eyes – it's that Team Bondi has rendered it a practical irrelevance. These may not look exactly like real faces, but they're just as expressive, and without them *LA Noire*'s interview and interrogation mechanics just wouldn't work. But the moment that cinches it for us isn't when we're eyeing the shifty sideways glances or wavering smiles of a suspect, it's when Cole Phelps, *LA Noire*'s protagonist, looks over a hit-and-run victim at the outset of a case. Even without the bloodstains, even if the body wasn't lying awkwardly on the road, you'd know the victim was dead. There's something unpleasantly absent from his face.

> If their expression hints they're not to be trusted, then you can 'force' the truth from them with some more aggressive questioning, or you can accuse them of lying

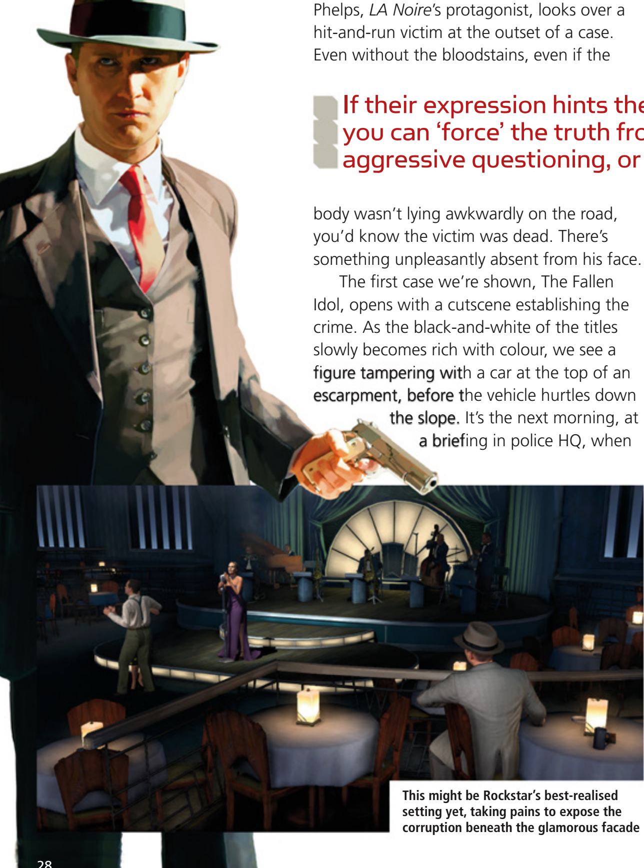
The first case we're shown, The Fallen Idol, opens with a cutscene establishing the crime. As the black-and-white of the titles slowly becomes rich with colour, we see a figure tampering with a car at the top of an escarpment, before the vehicle hurtles down the slope. It's the next morning, at a briefing in police HQ, when Cole discovers that the car contained two drugged victims – both of whom survived as the car crashed into an advertising billboard halfway down the hill – and that he's been assigned the case.

One of the victims, a 15-year-old named Jessica, is in the hospital. The other, June Ballard, a B-movie actress whose star has already faded, remains at the scene, available for questioning. But first: the search for clues. When Phelps arrives, some moody jazz indicates evidence to be found, and a staccato tinkle of two notes sounds when he's standing by a clue. The items Phelps finds include Jessica's torn underwear, a letter from her parents begging her to come home (which also indicates she's been staying with an 'Aunt Junie') and – most unusually – a movie prop: a shrunken head used to wedge the car's accelerator pedal.

The following conversation with Aunt Junie demonstrates the subtlety of *LA Noire*'s facial animation. As the one-time starlet greets Phelps, she puts on an expression of strained charm which begins to splinter over the course of the interview. Interrogations hinge on working out whether or not what the subject says corroborates with your own findings, and watching their facial expressions for signs of shiftiness. Believe what they say and you can 'coax' them for further info, though if they were hiding something you'll have missed your opportunity to unearth the truth. If something they've said seems a little off, and their expression hints they're not to be trusted, then you can 'force' the truth from them with some more aggressive questioning. Finally, if what they say directly contradicts evidence in your possession, you can accuse them of lying. When June suggests that Jessica was fine the previous day, Phelps produces the ripped underwear to suggest otherwise.

Phelps eventually extracts a grubby story from the actress. She'd taken the girl to an audition with a movie producer, Mark Bishop. What happened on Bishop's casting couch, June insists, is between him and the girl – but June's convinced it's Bishop who subsequently drugged and tried to kill them. She also mentions that the producer had offered her a role in his latest picture, only to withdraw it soon after. But surely that would only provide June with a motive?

As the case twists and turns towards its seedy conclusion – which we won't spoil – it's clear that *LA Noire*'s investigation and interrogation mechanics are at the core of its cases. What's more interesting at this stage, however, is the way in which Team Bondi is



This might be Rockstar's best-realised setting yet, taking pains to expose the corruption beneath the glamorous facade







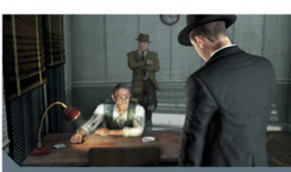
Phelps will change partners throughout the course of the game. The partner we've spent the most time with so far is the hot-tempered Bukowski – whose lack of charm makes him a perfect partner for good cop (mostly) Phelps



breaking up those key scenes. *LA Noire* takes place in a recreation of '50s LA – though Rockstar stresses that it's not an open-world game – and while Phelps will sometimes find the journey between leads uneventful, in this case he's required to cautiously tail a suspect, and later finds himself the quarry in a high-speed chase (Rockstar later gives us a glimpse of a second case in which Phelps is the pursuer). There's something surprising about how swiftly things can descend into traditional thirdperson action territory – Phelps' partner leans out the passenger-side window, exchanging fire with the gangster assailants – especially when, at the climax of the case, Phelps ends up embroiled in an on-foot firefight.

While the combat seems mechanically solid, with weapons displaying more of *Red Dead Redemption*'s messy force than *GTAIV*'s cold precision, it'll be interesting to see how easily the finished game manages to segue between treating bad guys as unique individuals, complete with quivering lips and tensed facial muscles, and disposable cannon fodder. There's definitely something odd about watching Phelps – given a nuanced performance by Mad Men actor Aaron Staton – shift from a very human-seeming sleuth to a bullet-absorbing superman with recharging health. Old-fashioned fisticuffs seem more in keeping with the tone of the game, though Team Bondi is yet to perfect the hand-to-hand combat model.

Nonetheless, *LA Noire*'s action interludes, even if they are more familiar than the detection work they punctuate, suggest a game refusing to be defined by any single feature. Team Bondi's noir-themed genre piece might be built around mysteries, but it's aiming to be a thriller.

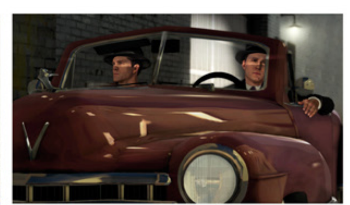


Fool me once...

When we spoke to Team Bondi in E213, it was unclear how failure to extract information during interviews could work in the game. The team has avoided the immersion-puncturing routine of repeating conversations until you hit upon the right response, instead allowing an unsuccessful interview to lead to a broadening of options – fail to get a licence plate from a witness and you may have to visit multiple owners of the same car model. It's easier to be taken in by a lie than you might think – as we find out when interviewing a bartender who claims not have seen the hit-and-run. We 'believe' him – and a message informing us we missed some evidence appears. Next time, we pause before choosing a response, and watch as his smile begins to waver.



Phelps starts off life as a regular patrolman, before becoming a detective. As the game progresses, he moves from one 'desk' to another. The cases we've seen are from his time on the traffic desk

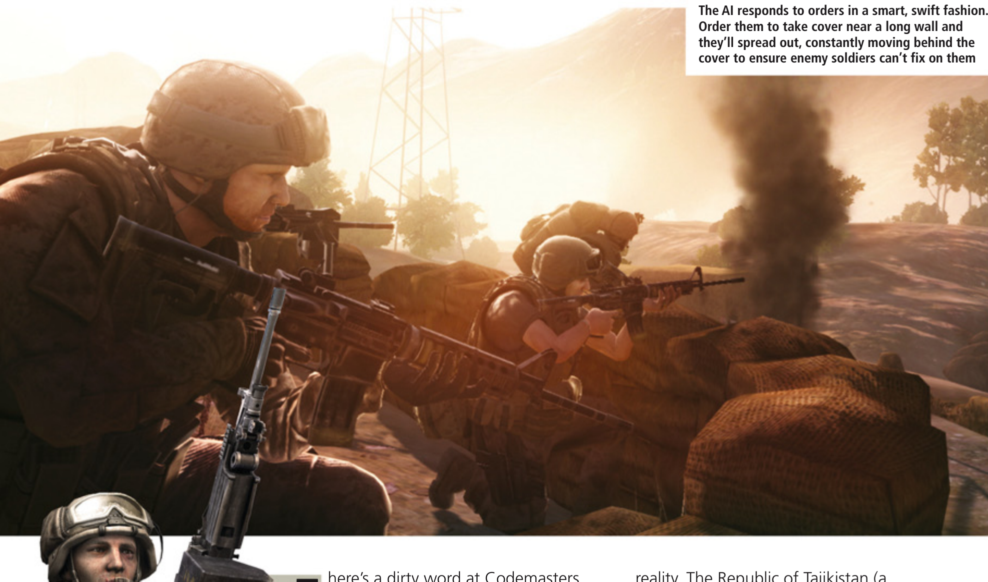




FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2011**

Operation Flashpoint: Red River

The dragon has risen, so it's back to the front for Codemasters' sweary marines



The AI responds to orders in a smart, swift fashion. Order them to take cover near a long wall and they'll spread out, constantly moving behind the cover to ensure enemy soldiers can't fix on them



Weapons strike the right balance between feeling like toys and feeling like tools. A precise one-shot kill is more than worth the wait for your sights to settle

There's a dirty word at Codemasters HQ, and that's 'simulation'. We accidentally say it – more than once – and each time *Operation Flashpoint: Red River*'s creative director **Sion Lenton** winces. "We don't like to talk about 'simulation'," he says, apologetically. "We prefer to think in terms of authenticity."

Red River, the sequel to 2009's *Dragon Rising*, picks up where that game's Clancy-esque near-future fiction left off – with the United States Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army engaged in a second fight over a volatile international hotspot. Whereas *Dragon Rising* took the topography of an Alaskan island and set the game off the coast of Japan, *Red River* is rooted that bit more in reality. The Republic of Tajikistan (a landlocked central Asian country bordering China) is the new target of Chinese expansion, and the American marines sent in to stop it are a battle-hardened force fighting off the back of three tours of duty in Afghanistan. Admittedly, the scratched, dirty, duct-taped weaponry wielded by *Red River*'s veteran soldiers can offer only a superficial kind of authenticity, but it symbolises a move away from *Dragon Rising*'s factory-fresh, slightly characterless aesthetic.

Red River appears to be further honing *Dragon Rising*'s delicate balance between open-ended emergence and set-piece drama. The first level we're shown, Human Terrain, sees the player's squad of marines tentatively approaching a seemingly deserted village. The look of this place – sun-baked stone broken up by spots of pastel colours – and the sand-blasted landscape which surrounds it take the game a step away from *Dragon Rising*'s volcanic landscape and towards present-day conflicts. As does the presence of an insurgent force. Distinct from the well-equipped PLA, the guerrillas shooting from the rooftops and the streets behind abandoned buildings are no less dangerous.

The usual *Flashpoint* rules regarding the complete lethality of bullets apply. Before our demonstrator ducks behind cover, he orders members of his fireteam to suppress an insurgent firing from a rooftop in the distance – in the process revealing that the menu for issuing orders has been streamlined from three layers to two. We're also made aware that two other fireteams – of which the player has no direct control – are flanking the sides of the village. The decision to include them, Lenton explains, was made to heighten the feeling that players are taking part in a wider conflict. Intriguingly, after the player's first, overly gung-ho attempt to push through the village fails, the checkpoint restarts and one of the fireteams flanks the insurgents at a noticeably faster pace – suggesting that the behaviour of both friendly and enemy AI will affect the way a scenario plays out.

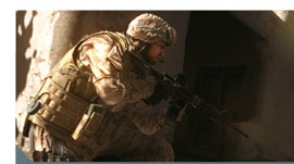
Both attempts to push forward reveal a familiar rhythm of careful advancement punctuated by short bursts of violence. The sound of bullets hitting nearby stone isn't a constant backdrop noise here, it's a serious incitement to get back in cover, fast. It's clear that, without a co-ordinated approach

> The American marines sent in to stop the Chinese expansionism are a battle-hardened force fighting off the back of three tours of duty in Afghanistan



Beyond classes, *Red River* allows your soldier's loadout to be customised for things like faster aiming or more damage





Sorry, what?

If you're reading this, then you're probably better versed in military lingo than the average civvie. You'll even have heard the phrases 'Tango down', 'danger close' and 'we're Oscar Mike' more times than a non-gaming marine ever will. *Red River* promises to expand your vocabulary, informing you during loading screens, for instance, that 'get some' is a marine term expressing enthusiasm (which isn't what we thought it meant). Lenton is particularly enthusiastic about marine swearing. "A 'googlefuck' is a great one," he says. "'Motard's a great one, too. A motard is an insanely motivated individual. Some of the swear words you will never have heard before"

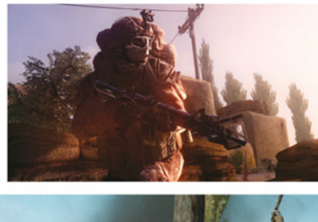
utilising your whole team (which alongside the Rifleman, Scout and Grenadier classes of the last game now includes the big-gun-toting Auto Rifleman), success is unlikely.

Away from the campaign, Lenton is keen to demonstrate a less authentic – we hope – take on warfare. Fireteam Engagement is a collection of four gametypes offering scored bouts of co-op gameplay. The game we play, Last Stand, should be familiar to anyone who's engaged in a Firefight against a rampaging Horde of late. You and your fireteam defend a fortified position against multiple waves of enemy troops – though in a twist on the formula you have to choose between waves whether or not to 'bank' your score by evacuating or staying on for another round. Familiar as this gametype is rapidly becoming, *Flashpoint*'s distinctive approach to combat makes it work. You'll be fighting enemies at distances much greater than in *Gears*' or *Halo*'s similar modes, firing off single shots before hurriedly changing position. When enemies begin to get close you can push them back by calling in artillery – which in our case leads to a series of thunderously close explosions.

As well as Last Stand's defence gametype, there are modes themed around assaulting targets, escorting convoys and search-and-rescue missions. The scoring in all these modes marks a step away from *Flashpoint*'s straight-faced campaign. "The design team had a brief to come up with modes that were fun," Lenton explains. "[Fireteam Engagement] is fun, but not at the expense of the core mechanics. You're doing things that you're used to doing in-game and getting points for doing them, and it sits alongside a strong campaign mode as well."

Perhaps the most interesting element of *Red River*'s multiplayer is the absence of any competitive mode. The lack of chaotic deathmatch carnage best demonstrates Codemasters' commitment to building a tactically rich experience with teamwork at its core. Whatever you call it – simulated or authentic – *Red River* looks to be making advancements on *Flashpoint*'s distinctive take on soldiering.







Codemasters stresses the fact that the mountains of Tajikistan are better suited to *Flashpoint*'s engine than *Dragon Rising*'s ocean-filled horizons, and promises changing terrain types over the course of the game

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q2 2011**

Dirt 3

Codemasters' schizophrenic driving series heads back to its rallying routes while introducing a whole new way to play





Though Gymkhana uses the same handling model as the rest of the game, the increased power of the cars makes controlling them a very different challenge to rallying



Doughnut pass go

Along with splitscreen and online racing, *Dirt 3* will offer a range of pass-the-pad party games for up to eight players. While Codemasters isn't ready to reveal exactly what they might entail, executive producer Clive Moody hints that they won't be the usual bunch of time trials and driving challenges we've seen so many times before. "They are more off-the-wall than traditional-style racing, but it's all about team play," he says. "Some will take place in the DC Compound area and some on circuits, but we're having fun coming up with stuff that you just wouldn't expect to see in a racing game. There's some quite wild stuff coming up."

If *Colin McRae: Dirt 2* was a heartfelt homage to the late, great rally driver, *Dirt 3* represents Ken Block's opportunity to take centre stage – a fact underscored by the absence of McRae's name from the title. It's ironic, then, that Codemasters' latest makes a concerted effort to return to the series' rallying roots and appease those who were unhappy with the previous game's Americanisation.

> The roster features a litany of iconic vehicles, from the Lancia Stratos, Quattro and RS2000 of the '70s and '80s to the Lancia Delta Integrale and McRae's Subaru

So, gone is the boisterous festival atmosphere and swooping trailer-based interface, replaced instead by an ethereal, cool-headed menu that more closely resembles the first *Dirt*'s frontend. Gone, too, are the characteristic bloomy visuals, making way for more subdued, naturalistic lighting. *Dirt 3* is about being a professional rally driver, not "leaving your pants on the trailer floor," as one of the development team colourfully explains.

Traditional point-to-point rallying makes up 60 per cent of *Dirt 3*'s 100 stages, bolstered by the introduction of an official WRC licence along with more European and Scandinavian destinations including Finland, Norway and Monte Carlo. The more varied geography benefits from *Dirt 3*'s new weather system – taken from *F1 2010*, though less dynamic here – which adds rain and deformable snow to complement another series first: night racing.

With the greater variety of surfaces and conditions comes the need for more detailed handling, and Codemasters has responded. In its push toward greater realism, the studio has made the cars feel considerably heavier (though no less agile), telegraphing their shifting weight as they corner, brake or momentarily leave the ground. In the Finnish stage we try, it's clear that, more than ever before, paying attention to camber and surface type is key to achieving the fastest stage times. Hooking a wheel into a rut in the track and powering out of the corner on the perfect line offers immense satisfaction.

Car nuts were well catered for in *Dirt 2*, but Codemasters has written an impassioned love letter to rally fans in this next instalment. Besides *Dirt 2*'s returning machinery, the roster features a litany of iconic vehicles, from the Lancia Stratos, Quattro S1 and RS2000 of the '70s and '80s to the Lancia Delta Integrale and McRae's famous 555 Subaru. The heady lineup evokes not only rally's heyday, but also that of the series – a sensation only bolstered by the return of small touches like the photographers who desperately run from the track as you tear towards them.

But *Dirt 3* hasn't entirely abandoned its rowdy side, and fans of the diversity offered up last time around will still be able to indulge in more off-kilter motorsport events, including Trailblazer, LandRush and the brand-new Gymkhana mode. Ken Block's most significant contribution to the package, Gymkhana gives players the opportunity to emulate Block's hugely popular YouTube antics, setting them loose in one of three







Despite dropping McRae from the title, the inclusion of classic cars like the Quattro and locations such as Finland ensure the game feels steeped in both the rich heritage of rally and the series

tight, object-laden arenas wielding a 600bhp car. Anyone who's watched Block's tyre-searing choreography will instantly recognise the potential in the innocuously placed trailers, ramps, sewer pipes and an excavator with its arm extended just far enough to get a car through. Sideways, of course. The mode's focus on balletic, flowing vehicle control should provide a refreshing counterpoint to the blood-and-thunder drama of powering through a forest rally stage at night in thick snow.

That's not to say it's instantly accessible, however, and the short time we spend in the Battersea-based DC Compound yields only three stunt achievements and a great deal more dented body panels – showcasing the improved damage model – despite our best efforts. Watching one of the development team thread the car around the space demonstrates what's possible with a little practice, though. Two more arenas join Battersea – the LA Coliseum and Monaco Harbour – but these are reserved for career-based competitive events, not freestyle improvisation. Given that the level furniture in these stages can't be edited, Gymkhana's ability to hold players' attention is yet to be proved but, like *Trials HD* or even a *Tony Hawk* title, the potential for bragging rights and high scores (especially in online multiplayer) could prove a particularly engaging draw.

Despite *Dirt 3*'s pre-alpha status, the Ego engine does an admirable job of rendering mud, cars and any combination of the two with even greater clarity. Hopefully it will take the new splitscreen option in its stride, too. And Codemasters' mastery of camera direction remains unrivalled during the game's replays, which now offer the option to upload particularly good (or disastrous) runs to YouTube, along with the ever-useful Flashbacks.

Where the last game could occasionally seem a little forced, *Dirt 3* seems a lot more comfortable in its skin. Rather than feel like a neutering compromise, the combination of traditional rallying and Gymkhana posturing is a pleasing partnership that should appeal to fans of both of *Dirt*'s personalities. Far from another iterative improvement, *Dirt 3* might just be the series' biggest reboot yet.

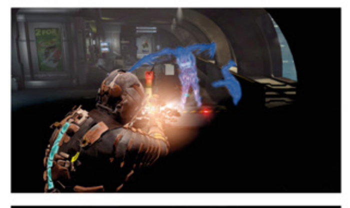


The ability to upload videos to Youtube is key to Gymkhana's appeal. Outdoing Ken Block's real-life performances will likely become an obsession for many



Though we were limited to Battersea Power Station's courtyard in Gymkhana, the positioning of jumps and some suspicious, cloth-covered gaps in the building suggest that more opportunities to show off exist inside







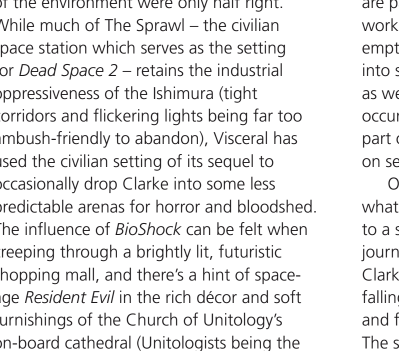
As with the first game, using stasis to slow necromorphs before removing their limbs with surgical accuracy is key. Out of stasis, enemies can move frighteningly fast

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 25**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E222**

Dead Space 2

A careful peek around the corner at the sequel's opening chapters

Isaac Clarke might have found his voice – and this time the camera occasionally finds his face – but that doesn't make *Dead Space 2* less than familiar. Indeed, when our demo drops us midway through the second chapter of Visceral's survival horror sequel, we take a moment to make sure we haven't somehow wound up back on the Ishimura. The utilitarian architecture appears unchanged, nor does the galaxy-wide lightbulb shortage, and an audio diary left on the floor reminds us of *Dead Space*'s main combat conceit – aim for the limbs, not the head – but *Dead Space 2* can afford to retrace some of the first game's slick and terrifying steps. It's the shocks and scares that need to catch players off guard, and on the basis of our demo, *Dead Space 2* doesn't disappoint.



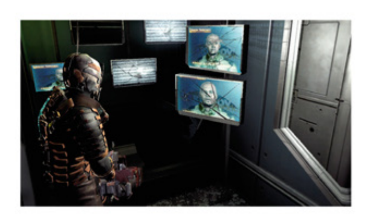
Dead Space's successful integration of videogame HUD elements into its fiction is all the more notable the second time around because it still hasn't been copied

It turns out that those initial impressions of the environment were only half right. While much of The Sprawl – the civilian space station which serves as the setting for *Dead Space 2* – retains the industrial oppressiveness of the Ishimura (tight corridors and flickering lights being far too ambush-friendly to abandon), Visceral has used the civilian setting of its sequel to occasionally drop Clarke into some less predictable arenas for horror and bloodshed. The influence of *BioShock* can be felt when creeping through a brightly lit, futuristic shopping mall, and there's a hint of space-age *Resident Evil* in the rich décor and soft furnishings of the Church of Unitology's on-board cathedral (Unitologists being the *Dead Space* franchise's cult of necromorph-worshipping fanatics). Journeys to and from these locations are punctuated by glimpses of The Sprawl's – yes, sprawling – exterior and the military police shuttles which, for reasons unclear during our demo, are hunting for Clarke. One sequence sees him running through a rapidly depressurising chamber, its windows shot out by the attack ship circling around outside.

Not that The Sprawl's police are the only ones who get to shoot out windows. *Dead Space 2*'s combat appears mostly unchanged, but some air-pressure-assisted defenestration is one of the few new tricks up Clarke's armour-plated sleeve. Certain flimsy windows are part of The Sprawl's ongoing construction work, and Clarke can shoot through them to empty a room full of slathering necromorphs into space – and, if he's not careful, himself as well. While the areas in which this can occur are obviously prescribed, they come as part of what appears to be a wider reliance on set-piece combat.

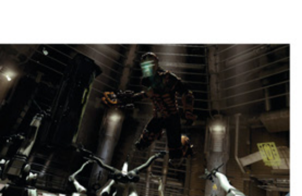
One such scene takes place on board what appears to be The Sprawl's answer to a subway train. Midway through the journey, the train tips and freefalls, and Clarke himself begins sliding along and falling between carriages, avoiding debris and fighting off necromorphs as he falls. The segment ends with Clarke suspended upside down, foot caught in wreckage of the train now jutting from a ceiling, fighting off a horde of reanimated corpses as he struggles to get free.

The first *Dead Space* managed to pack in plenty of moments of such pressure-cooker intensity, but our time spent in the early levels of *Dead Space 2* suggests that Visceral – aware, perhaps, that no sequel could recapture the impact of the first game's atmosphere of dread – has put even more effort into interspersing the mounting horror with creative and frenzied violence. To find out how successful an approach this has been, see our review next issue.





Clarke's wife continues to appear in his hallucinations. Indeed, with his deteriorating mental state composing a key element of the plot, expect plenty of scenes like this



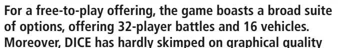
Controlled ascent

Those oddly peaceful zero-gravity moments from the first *Dead Space* return, with altered, more flexible controls. In the first game, Clarke could walk along any surface in a zero-G section and fling himself between them. However, some of the changes to Clarke's upgraded RIG (his armoured suit, which looks a little leaner and more combat-friendly this time around) include the ability to fire his weapon in mid-air and gas jets which allow him to control his direction mid-flight. While the zero-G sections we've played so far have been mercifully free of enemies, we expect the full game to put Clarke's new zero-G versatility to the test.





Looking at the maps and the visual style, you might suspect that *Play4Free* is essentially a free version of a five-year-old game's multiplayer, but the pace is much faster than in *Battlefield 2*



For a free-to-play offering, the game boasts a broad suite of options, offering 32-player battles and 16 vehicles. Moreover, DICE has hardly skimped on graphical quality

Battlefield Play4Free

Could a free-to-play game lure hardcore headshot junkies away from Call Of Duty?

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **SPRING**

The *Battlefield Heroes* free-to-play shooter experiment clearly paid off in a big way for EA. The game has six million registered players and a healthy community of cartoon soldiers spending their spare pennies on hats. Instead of developing a sequel in the same mould, EA's free-to-play division has its sights set on hardcore FPS fans with *Battlefield Play4Free*. Away with the cel-shaded graphical style, in with grimy military realism, draw distance and film grain.

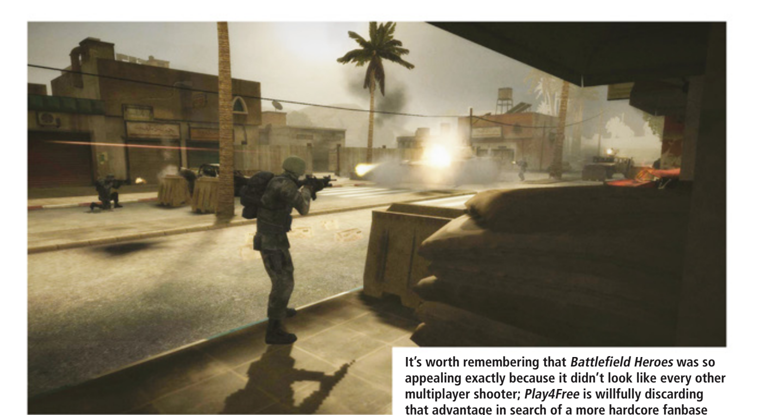
Who does EA imagine will play it? The same people that play *Bad Company 2* and *Call Of Duty*, apparently – just at different times. HD console shooters are for hours-long sessions; *Battlefield: Play4Free* is for their 30-minute lunch break. It might seem unlikely that people have room for more than one persistent multiplayer shooter in their lives, but the publisher's market research apparently backs up the theory.

The team working on *Play4Free* is comprised of series veterans – among them **James Salt**, its senior producer, who has been a designer at DICE since *Battlefield 2*. He describes *Play4Free* as a "*Battlefield* best-of," with *BC2*'s weaponry and *BF2*'s maps, brought up to date with some careful tweaking. "Our initial thought was that we could reuse maps that were popular and fun," he says, "but if you go back and play them now, they're actually really slow by today's standards. We've all been playing *Call Of Duty* and *Bad Company 2*, so we needed to do some work. We've gone in and moved things around, and actually made the play area smaller to make it faster-paced."

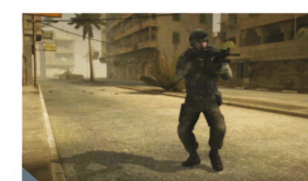
The classes – Recon, Assault, Medic and Engineer – will be familiar to any *Battlefield* player, but talent trees and unlockable outfits turn identikit soldier archetypes into expressions of personal taste. *Play4Free* has two talent trees, one based on equipment and one on physical training. Aspirant supersoldiers can put all of their level-up points into health, ammunition capacity and running speed, while engineers might want to learn to use C4. Access to vehicles – tanks and helicopters, mostly – depends on experience. Only those who spend their training points on piloting skills will be able to command a chopper, which should hopefully stop enthusiastic new players from flying straight into walls, killing everyone.

But where will *Play4Free* make its money? We're told that it will focus entirely on microtransactions, since in-game advertising hasn't proved hugely successful in EA's previous free-to-play games ("It was all right in America," Salt explains, "but in Europe we were just getting adverts for weird dentistry"). Like *Battlefield Heroes*, there are two currencies (see 'Balance of power'), one earned by playing and one that you pay real money for – *Heroes* players will be able to unify their account with *Play4Free*, but not transfer soldiers or experience.

Salt estimates that around five per cent of *Play4Free*'s audience will invest real money in their characters – around the same as in *Heroes*. EA will continue to support *Heroes* fully well beyond *Play4Free*'s launch, and the publisher seems confident that it will complement the older game rather than cannibalising its audience. But by adopting realism and a ramped-up graphical style in place of *Heroes*' lighthearted and rather refreshing alternative, *Play4Free* is positioning itself alongside the giants of the genre. It seems inevitable that it will have to compete with those games for players' time, whatever EA's market research says.



It's worth remembering that *Battlefield Heroes* was so appealing exactly because it didn't look like every other multiplayer shooter; *Play4Free* is willfully discarding that advantage in search of a more hardcore fanbase



Balance of power

Balancing is always a concern in free-to-play games: how do you motivate some players to pay for extra features without disadvantaging everybody else? As in *Heroes*, the things that you can buy with real money in *Play4Free* are mainly cosmetic. Spec-ops gear and fancy uniforms won't give you any tangible advantage, but they will help you to stand out from every other fool in the sights of the enemy's sniper rifle. Purchasable guns therefore aren't superweapons that unbalance the game, but slight twists on the default free arsenal. But will people really pay money for a better-looking outfit in a firstperson game? "People on the internet are very vain," observes Salt. He may have a point there.





Shift 2 doesn't neglect the details – it's still possible to tweak everything about a car, from body to suspension. Fastidious petrolheads should find little to moan about





After a bad crash in helmet-cam view, it takes a few seconds for the dizzied driver to reorientate himself. Though the cars get utterly mangled, thankfully their occupants always seem to escape unscathed

Need For Speed: Shift 2 Unleashed

While Hot Pursuit leaves rivals in the dust, Slightly Mad Studios shifts its racer's focus in another direction

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Need for Speed, once synonymous with arcade-style competitive racing, is now a franchise with many faces. *Need For Speed World* is all swagger and hot paint jobs, staging *Carbon*'s illegal street racing in a massively multiplayer open world. Criterion's recent *Hot Pursuit* is a blistering, heart-in-mouth chase, the purest arcade racer of this year. *Shift*, meanwhile, is the series' professional simulation-racer side, its ambassador to *Forza* and *Gran Turismo* fans.

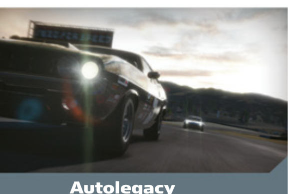
Shift 2 is as far away from an arcade racer as *Need For Speed* gets, but it's still hot-blooded. A more realistic driving experience need not mean a sterile one. Its remit is to simulate what it really feels like to be behind the wheel at 200mph, fear and adrenaline included. In pursuit of that ideal, Slightly Mad has come up with a way to simulate the effects of physics on the driver as well as the car: a helmet camera. *Shift 2* might be world's first truly firstperson racing game.

All of the usual racing views are there as well, but the helmet cam is one of the more promising new features of recent years in simulation driving. Where normal cockpit views are static, it moves with the driver's eyes. The view is thrown about when you stamp on the brake, and inclines towards the apex of a corner as the driver turns his head. If you're approaching a corner too fast, the view shakes realistically as the tyres struggle to grip the tarmac, blurring and jolting violently if you lose control and skid off into the dirt. Crashes really feel like crashes.

As if to prove that *Shift 2* has as much to offer the thrill-seeker as *Hot Pursuit*, lead designer Andy Tudor demonstrates a race around one of the original *Shift*'s courses in the middle of the night – without floodlights. Road markings, turns and barrels marking the track boundary appear suddenly in the sweep of the headlights. When he slams into the wall on a sharp corner, the front end of the car crumples, leaving him navigating at high speed practically by instinct alone. If you think you know a track, says Tudor, try racing it without headlights.

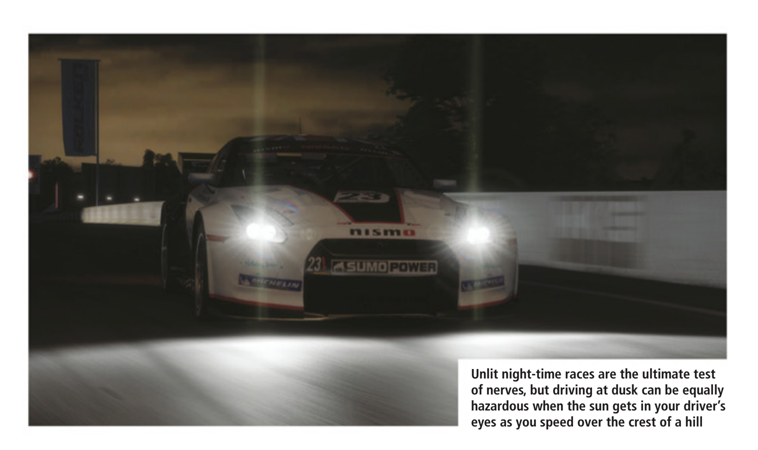
The menu backdrops are beautiful, loving panning shots of the vehicles in their pristine states, but *Shift 2*'s sleek, shining cars can be crushed into metal concertinas if you hit a concrete wall at high speed. Damage is strikingly realistic, from scrapes in the paint job and accumulated dirt to spectacular multi-flip crashes that send pieces of expensive sports car flying all over the track, becoming hazards for the racers behind. Debris remains on the road, and the tracks themselves become worn and scored with veering black skid marks over time.

The cars look and sound gorgeous, but the most important thing in any racer – particularly a simulation – is how they feel. With markedly fewer cars in the virtual garage than its greatest rivals, *Shift 2* will have to make each one a distinct ride that feels great to drive.



Autolegacy

Shift 2 features an evolution of the Autolog feature premiered in _Hot Pursuit_, which tracks your friends' achievements and lap times and presents them in a social-network composition, doing away with global leaderboards and replacing them with personalised competition. We're told the presentation has been improved here, making it easier to navigate and find the information you're seeking. Whatever the case, having worked an insidiously compulsive magic in _Hot Pursuit_, it's almost inevitable that Autolog will do the same for Slightly Mad's game.



Unlit night-time races are the ultimate test of nerves, but driving at dusk can be equally hazardous when the sun gets in your driver's eyes as you speed over the crest of a hill



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FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

Darkspore

Maxis' latest is, unexpectedly, a creature-based collectathon



Alien vs predator

***Darkspore*'s PvP is made interesting by the ability to instantly switch between different weaponised aliens, and the level of unique customisation that each player brings to a match. In one-on-one or two-on-two battles, skills and creatures whose uses are rather limited in planet environments can come into their own. Matches are best of three, and the losing player has the opportunity to change up their squad between rounds to better exploit the opposing team's weaknesses. Seeing other teams up close will doubtless inspire invention.**

Darkspore bears the *Spore* name, but barely even the slightest family resemblance. It's an endearingly simple, click-to-kill, loot-driven action-RPG in the My First *Diablo* mould, with only the style and variety of alien creatures to remind you where it came from. One level is populated entirely by one-legged blue Cyclopes hopping unthreateningly around on arcing metal walkways. Another has five increasingly weird varieties of spider.

"We used the technology from *Spore* to base the character system on, but beyond that it's a new game from scratch," explains *Darkspore*'s executive producer, **Mike Perry**. Players build up a collection of aliens to take with them to new planets, adjusting the team according to the challenge ahead. It plays out a little like a fast-paced *Pokémon*, letting you switch between different aliens in an instant, deploying the right creature for the situation at hand.

Creatures are effectively the game's loot, along with the different items and parts that customise their look and enhance their stats. Working through the campaign, every player will eventually unlock all the same aliens; the necessary self-expression comes in the form of the particular team you choose to construct, and how you choose to upgrade it. Special attacks are to be found on the number keys, with movement and basic attacks handled via the mouse. A hulking, red lizardlike alien has an area-of-effect attack that sets its surroundings aflame; a green insectoid creature has a vine move that binds enemies in place.





Controllable aliens have somewhat Cartoon Networky names like Arakna and Magnos. Most of those we've seen so far have a robotic or arachnoid flavour to them

Like most games of its nature, *Darkspore* comes alive in co-operative play, where two players' tastes, experience and abilities can intermingle and throw up new strategies.

Unusually, *Darkspore* adapts itself to your playstyle, using an AI director to generate planets and their aggressive wildlife. "This is something for which we took a lot of inspiration from *Left 4 Dead*," says Perry. "It controls which enemies spawn, how many of them there are, what they do, how hard they are, and by watching how you're playing the game, keeps it balanced and challenging for you."

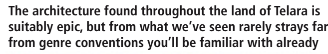
The levels are 15-minute slices of action capped by a boss creature. Before each planetside deployment, an info screen shows you the resident nasties and a difficulty level estimation so that you can adjust your squad. It's a rolling challenge, inventing incrementally more difficult planets with every success and offering the choice to either cash out or take a chance at a harder planet with better loot. Maxis calls it the chain game, and it adds an interesting element of risk and reward.

The environments we've seen were disappointingly bland, with plenty of glowing machinery in sci-fi blues and purples, but there's nothing to prove that the full game won't have planets as verdant, frozen or bizarre as *Spore*'s. The alien design and colour scheme is certain to appeal to the section of the population that's currently forcing parents to spend millions on Ben 10 merchandise. *Darkspore*'s combination of creature-collecting, customisation and loot should make it compulsive, but it seems like Maxis is leaving the quirky creativity of the original *Spore* behind.



There's no way to create your own alien warriors, which seems strange when Maxis has such a comprehensive suite of creature-design tools ready-made in *Spore* that it could have added





The architecture found throughout the land of Telara is suitably epic, but from what we've seen rarely strays far from genre conventions you'll be familiar with already





Rift: Planes Of Telara

Trion Worlds' fantasy MMORPG brings dynamic zones and streamlined play to the table, but is it in danger of being wiped out by a Cataclysm?

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **TRION WORLDS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBC**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E216**

With Azeroth now torn asunder as *Cataclysm* rampages through *World Of Warcraft*, it seems an unfortunate time to be working on a fantasy MMORPG whose core tenet is world-destroying rifts. But where Blizzard has simply distressed the geography of its ostensibly inert world, *Rift*'s hook is that the tears in its fabric are dynamic. The titular rifts, which can appear anywhere across the land of Telara, blacken the land and spread like a cancer if not dealt with swiftly. Allow one to remain for too long and it will become a foothold from which invading forces can attack villages, towns and cities, preventing players from acquiring quests until the occupying forces are routed. Ignore them entirely and the whole area will soon fall under their influence. It's a neat mechanic that ensures the struggle has a sense of ebb and flow, while providing instant visual feedback on your success (or otherwise).

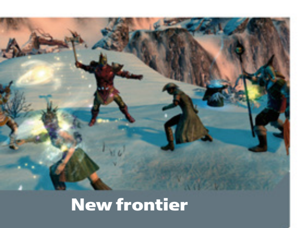
The sense of coherence is further reinforced by persistently connected zones. As we step into the world for the first time, the beach we're standing on is being bombarded by explosive projectiles from across a vast lake. Teleporting to the other side reveals their trebuchet sources and we see the area we've just left on the other side of the water. Moreover, the monsters spewed from rifts can travel between zones if they so choose, as can NPC vendors. The result is a world that feels dauntingly large and, in a good sense, unconcerned by your presence.

All the familiar MMORPG components are present and correct: a detailed character editor; warring factions, here called the Defiant and Guardians, partially united by a common enemy; PVP, PVE, dungeons and instances; and generic fantasy visuals that, while certainly attractive, lack the self-aware charm of *WOW*'s less po-faced clichés. But other aspects aren't quite so familiar. Trion Worlds has clearly thought long and hard about the problems inherent in the genre and attempted to address some of them. So, every player character has a ranged attack in their armoury. Loot a fallen enemy and you'll automatically gather spoils from all the surrounding corpses as well. A bag search tool enables items to be located by name, removing the need to trawl through an ever-growing inventory.

Standing in the vicinity of a rift triggers the transition to a more dramatic skybox, while particle and sound effects add to the sense that these are violently powerful entities

Perhaps the biggest revolution, though, is the class system. Rather than being locked to a single type, players select one of four callings – Warrior, Cleric, Mage or Rogue – and can then augment these with up to three souls (from a total of eight held) that drastically change abilities. So, level up the Champion soul and your character will be a great tank, whereas the Void Knight soul's strengths lie in defence. Souls can be switched at any point outside of combat, and the range of potential combinations offers players uncommon versatility when it comes to forming parties. *Rift* even goes so far as to suggest pairings for you – like a waiter proposing a wine to match your meal, suggests a Trion Worlds staffer.

Rift seems built from the ground up to provide a level of comforting familiarity to MMORPG players, while streamlining much of the grind that is associated with such games. Though its fantasy stylings aren't in any danger of differentiating the game in a crowded marketplace, its wealth of original ideas could result in a bold debut release for its publisher.



New frontier

"We're not trying to be a *WOW* killer; we still believe that there is an audience out there that wants to play a new MMOG and is willing to pay for it," says Trion spokesman Chris Schmidt when we acknowledge the elephant in the room. "I know that there are a lot of disenfranchised MMOG players out there who are pretty bored with what's available, so I know that we're going to get a lot of those people. I think the candid view is that we're going to get a lot of players from the existing games that they've gotten bored with over the years."



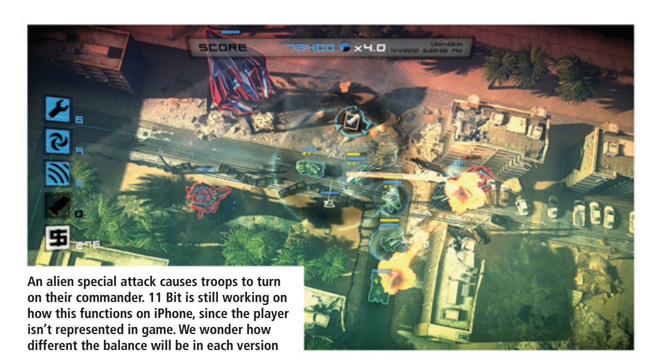
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FORMAT: **IPHONE, MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **11 BIT STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **POLAND**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**

Anomaly: Warzone Earth

Upturned tower defence goes touch-sensitive and randomly generated

We may be just a little sick of fighting off forces attacking towers, towns and trees. Blessedly, 11 Bit's twist on the genre puts you in the role of aggressor, chaperoning a column of armour between the defences of an alien invasion force. This isn't a traditional RTS, however: you directly control only the commander himself (or, in the iPhone version, you simply affect the world via your finger).



An alien special attack causes troops to turn on their commander. 11 Bit is still working on how this functions on iPhone, since the player isn't represented in game. We wonder how different the balance will be in each version

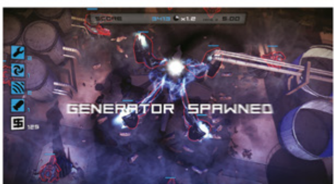
The tanks which form the main body of your force move automatically – although a quick switch to your tactical map allows you to choose their route through the grid of roads between you and your destination.

It quickly proves frantic. As the commander, your role isn't to shoot the enemy tripods which guard the roads, but to apply area-of-effect modifiers to your army as it ploughs deeper into enemy territory. You can drop decoys to cause enemy turrets to look the wrong way, call in air strikes and deploy smoke screens or repair zones. But there's a trick to it: in order to deploy these abilities you need to earn them, and in order to earn them you need to destroy aliens. Choosing a route which risks your troops in battle is therefore the only way to be better prepared for more deadly opponents. Once a turret falls beneath your guns, dropships scatter upgrades around the level, forcing the commander to dash away from the column of armour and pick them up. It creates a neat tension, as the further the commander is from his squad, the more vulnerable they are.

The commander also needs to snatch







The game looks unusually sumptuous, and yet, despite the explosions and lighting effects, important information is conveyed succinctly

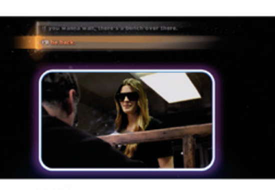
artefacts dotted around the level, as these can be converted into cash. Switching to the tactical view pauses time, allowing you to consider which units to airlift in, and how best to structure your column.

With its modest campaign bolstered by randomised levels and challenge modes, and for its asking price of around a tenner on PC, and even less on iPad, 11 Bit may just prove that the best tower defence is a tower offence.

YooStar 2

Get ready for your close-up in Blitz's silver-screen offering

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **YOOSTAR**
DEVELOPER: **BLITZ GAMES STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2011**




Especially convincing are the black-and-white scenes. The player integration seems that bit more seamless in classic movies such as Casablanca – or the "It's alive!" moment from Frankenstein

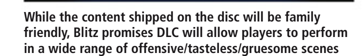
It seems *Dance Central* might have been the vanguard release in a new genre – the Simon Says 'em up. While *YooStar 2* is less interested in using Kinect to mark you on your ability to match prescribed motions, preferring to grade you instead on your script-reading skills, the core of both experiences is mimicking the onscreen happenings – though unlike *Dance Central*, *YooStar 2* is happy to encourage a more subversive approach.

The product of a protracted paperwork campaign (as well as persuading the major movie studios to take part, Blitz had to convince every actor to sign off on their inclusion), *YooStar 2* offers players the chance to indulge in 'movie karaoke' – by superimposing them over actors in classic movie scenes. Blitz's favourite for demonstrations is the "I'll be back" scene from The Terminator; in it, players can choose which of the actors in a scene they'd like to play – in this case Arnie or the soon-to-squashed cop.

Technically, at least in the Kinect version we've experienced, it works.

Position yourself within the actor guidelines to select your role!

Players are invited to a fill a silhouette of the role they're about to inhabit and, between them, the technology and this pre-emptive positioning helps to create the illusion that players are inside the scene and not merely superimposed on it. Whatever they do next – tribute or parody – can be broadcast via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, with the feedback received there appearing in game. The game will rate your attempts at an authentic performance, but is happy to let you improvise too. There's also a challenge mode, which, as well as requiring


While the content shipped on the disc will be family friendly, Blitz promises DLC will allow players to perform in a wide range of offensive/tasteless/gruesome scenes

some competent acting, will fire movie trivia quizzes at you between performances. While this structure should ensure a sense of progression for a solo player, it's sharing your less rigid interpretations of classic celluloid moments with friends that promises to be *YooStar 2*'s chief draw.







There's barely anything left to improve about *Fight Night*'s visuals. Boxers still naturally reach through and around each other's arms, swatting away blows

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA CANADA**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **MARCH**

Fight Night Champion

Is there still room for improvement in EA's acclaimed fighting franchise?

After the solid success of *Fight Night Rounds 3* and *4*, EA Canada seems to have had a minor crisis about where the series can go next. The slight change in nomenclature signals a move towards a sports-simulation approach to boxing. There are no more haymaker punches – those was deemed unrealistic.



There's still a voyeuristic zoom and slow-motion effect for brutal knockout moments; spittle and blood fly from an opponent's face in extreme close-up before he crumples to the ground

Gone, too, are any ringside patch-up minigames to fix a boxer's swollen face. That's left to the corner staff now, letting the player concentrate on the sport.

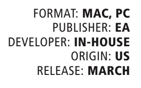
Fight Night Champion guards against button bashers and cheap tactics with possibly videogaming's first simulation of muscular lactic acid build-up. Repeatedly abuse the same part of a boxer's body by continually throwing the same punches with one arm, and he will become more sluggish with it. You can feasibly take a few rounds off, boxing defensively, to tire an opponent out and break down his guard. Injuries such as facial cuts must now be guarded carefully – if they split, spilling blood over the mat, you'll be vulnerable until the next fix-up.

Champion still maps punches to the analogue sticks, but in a more intuitive way, responding to directional flicks rather than arcing gestures that make certain moves more difficult to pull off with your left thumb. EA Canada found that *Round 4*'s players naturally gravitated towards punches that were easier to perform; its solution was to map them all with the same type of fluid motion. Each punch has a light and heavy variant that don't look particularly different onscreen, but add a new potential for strategic depth, forcing you to play closer attention to what your opponent is doing.

Fight Night has always had a fine eye for realism in its boxers' movement and reactions, and extending that further into the mechanics of the game itself is a promising development.

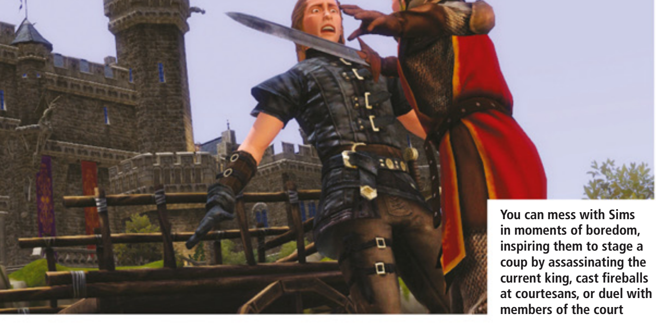
The Sims Medieval

Just a new setting and loads of themed furniture for The Sims, or an entirely new genre?



FORMAT: **MAC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**





You can mess with Sims in moments of boredom, inspiring them to stage a coup by assassinating the current king, cast fireballs at courtesans, or duel with members of the court

The Sims Medieval isn't *The Sims 3* with thrones and iron maidens in the furniture catalogue instead of showers and plasma TVs. It's an experimental, mildly schizophrenic cross between RTS and action adventure, with Sims thrown in to add a bit of personality. It's not often that a game like this surprises us.

In one incarnation, it's a medieval city-management sim, putting the player in charge of a slowly expanding kingdom with a charming castle on a hill. By building up ancillary structures – churches, barracks, hospitals and wizard's towers – you shape the character of this miniature civilisation. The people's wellbeing, security, culture and knowledge are tracked by heart meters on a stats screen, and their balance affects the impression the kingdom gives its neighbours, and hence its diplomatic relationships. Two fledgling religious institutions vie for your subjects' souls, preying upon their fear and discontentment or spiritually channelling their contended goodwill.

Click a tab on the top-left of the screen, and the game becomes something approaching a thirdperson action adventure. Most buildings come with heroes to live in them; the castle has a king or queen, the barracks have knights, and the wizard's tower has its very own Merlin, complete with druidic robes and staff. Rather than a kingdom full of peons to trap in outhouses, you're given a select few characters to star in a sort of medieval soap opera. There are quests, a robust crafting system for weapons and armour, full combat, and a spell system featuring offensive magic. It all strays much farther from established *Sims* territory than any previous spinoff.

The Sims DNA comes across most strongly in the cosmetic customisation. Every tiny aspect of a building's interior or a hero Sim's hair highlights can be tweaked and tinted – but not the design of the buildings themselves, which are static.

None of *The Sims Medieval*'s three competing personalities – city builder, adventure game and life simulation – may be strong enough to support a game by itself, but in combination, they look to provide something unique.



TITLE: **UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SCE**
DEVELOPER: **NAUGHTY DOG**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA**



SECRETS AND LIES

For the brave adventurers at Naughty Dog, Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception holds fortune, glory, mystery and danger. Via its studio in Santa Monica, we follow it to the ends of the Earth

You don't get very far in the pulp adventure genre by erring on the side of caution. Indiana Jones would never have left his classroom, let alone revisited the spikes and poisoned darts to rescue his hat. Buck Rogers would have stayed in the 20th century, eating pancakes on his porch. Dan Daren't doesn't quite have the same ring to it. As for *Uncharted* – well, it's called that for a reason. For the artists and engineers at Naughty Dog, building PlayStation 3's biggest action game is a constant near-death experience.

"If anyone on the team makes a face like, 'Oh, we're fucked,' then we know we're good," remarks co-president and former technical director **Christophe Balestra**. "We have to be uncomfortable. Three weeks before shipping *Uncharted 2*, we couldn't even fit the game in

Drake's Deception joins *Max Payne 2* and *Ninja Gaiden* in showing off its tech through a blazing building level, and for good reason, as the fire leaps naturally. Could this be a killer app for stereoscopic 3D?

memory. The day we have no solution for that, that's going to be a real problem."

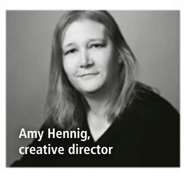
The phrase "seat of our pants" is used several times during our visit to Naughty Dog's new, spacious studio in Santa Monica. Most of the place looks like someone's about to install a very large branch of Currys amid the exposed air ducts and concrete, but every now and then you'll encounter an outlandish prop from some press junket or other, or a cabinet gleaming with crooked shards of glass, most etched with the words 'Game Of The Year'. After the overwhelming success of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, there are now so many that when you touch one of them you almost expect a hologram of Marlon Brando to appear.

The first *Uncharted*, *Drake's Fortune*, was a diamond in the rough, always a game that would spawn a fantastic sequel. Brilliant in many ways, it didn't do quite enough to untangle itself from the confusion of PlayStation 3's youth, the influence of a resurgent *Tomb Raider*, or fashionable comparisons to the *Gears Of War* combat system. Sequel *Among Thieves* defined both itself and Sony's platform, as much through what it didn't change as what it did; rather than apologise for being a 'cinematic adventure', replacing its Hollywood tropes with game-isms, it took things to the next level. "It's all about iteration," declares Balestra.

Joining lots of pragmatic talk about working within 'constraints', iteration is a generational


Christophe Balestra, co-president


Evan Wells, co-president


Amy Hennig, creative director


Justin Richmond, lead designer

buzzword bounced repeatedly off of Naughty Dog's walls. Few, though, are more qualified to use it. With its internal R&D department, the ICE Team, inventing vital PS3 libraries used by SCE, Epic's Unreal Engine and a host of others, it's learning the pros and cons of Sony's console firsthand. The process, furthermore, is a joint venture between everyone at the studio, and its face is Nathan Drake.

In *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*, the object of Drake's desire is the lost city of Ubar, an Arabian trade capital known to many as Iram Of The Pillars. Romanticised by Arabian Nights folklore, this fabulously wealthy region was smitten by God for its corruption and driven into the sands of the Rub' al-Khali desert, one of the most hostile and, dare we say it, uncharted places on the planet. A second Sodom and Gomorrah right on the border between fact and fiction – trade records mention it; NASA and the military have looked for it – it's a perfect venue for all kinds of reasons.

For one thing, most Boy's Own-style adventure stories involve a breadcrumb trail – not just regional legend but an expedition which, in many cases, can be just as mythical as its destination. The trail left by Drake's supposed ancestor, Sir Francis Drake, continues to drive the events of *Uncharted*, but this time crosses another: that of archaeologist, diplomat, explorer and self-styled war hero TE Lawrence, aka Lawrence of Arabia. It's his quest for what he called 'Atlantis Of The Sands', shared by the likes of Marco

STATE SERKIS

Who doesn't love *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West*? No one, it seems. Who likes it unconditionally? Same answer. Ninja Theory's game is the closest parallel to *Uncharted* by a long stretch, a thematically strong, smartly scripted visual feast which publicly wrestles with the balance of combat dynamics and pace. "I thought it was great," says Wells. "Their mo-cap pipeline is very similar to ours and they take it very seriously." Richmond's take: "Their climbing mechanic does not allow you to die, so people have criticised that. It makes a better gameplay experience in one sense, but in another un-grounds it. It's the kind of tiny decision that can mess up the whole experience. We're constantly aware of that, playtesting and seeing if something breaks the *Uncharted* fiction."

Polo, Bertram Thomas and Sir Ranulph Fiennes, which leads Drake and Sully into what creative director **Amy Hennig** calls "a nightmare of survival. It's going to push Drake to the limits of his endurance, and threatens to conjure all of his deepest fears."

The game's title, she points out, has many meanings. Essentially: is Drake the deceiver or the deceived? The enemy this time is "a kind they haven't seen before. It's not some unscrupulous antiquities smuggler or warlord, it's a more insidious enemy. An ancient and sinister clandestine order with cunning and a leader who manipulates through fear." But that's obviously not the complete story.

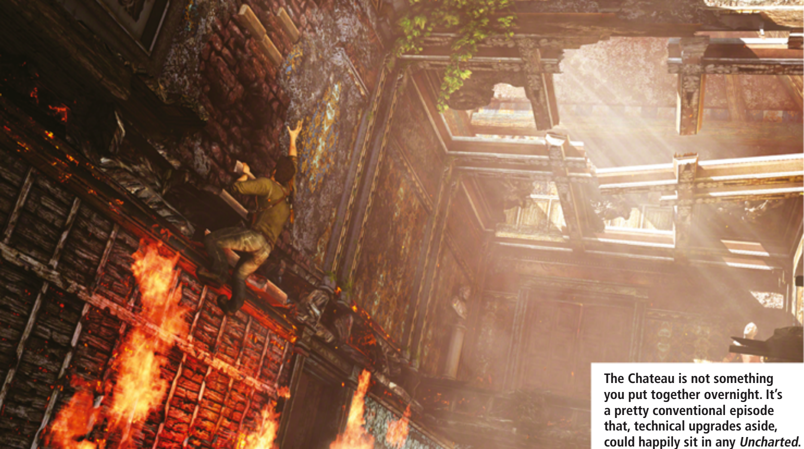
For clues, there's always TV's The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles, three episodes of which involve the Jones family's unlikely history with the man they simply called 'Ned'. That Lawrence, much like the real-life author of Seven Pillars Of Wisdom, is pictured as something of a fantasist. In the universes of both *Uncharted* and Indiana Jones, where the supernatural is unquestionably real, it's the human myths that often come up false. Drake's deceivers, you suspect, will be the 'history' books.

"Mysterious," is how Hennig describes the motorcycle crash that killed Lawrence, leaving his quest for Iram to his successors. But was it? The official version – that Lawrence exited a dip in the road to find two boys in his path, swerved and was thrown across the handlebars, sharing the fate of numerous dispatch riders in a time before crash helmets – is seldom disputed. The emphasis is Naughty Dog's, then, and if there isn't a twist about a clandestine order topping the poor man, we'll eat our hip flask.

For a team which has so far conquered two types of digital terrain, jungle and snow, the epic Empty Quarter of the Rub al-Khali holds a different kind of treasure: sand. Doubtless inspired by the Cinemascope landscapes of David Lean's Lawrence Of Arabia – that iconic shot of Omar Sharif materialising out of a shimmering horizon, dominated by tangerine skies – Naughty Dog is promising the complete package. "Sand in all its forms," says Hennig, "drifting across the dunes, blowing over the ridges, displacing as you walk through it; sandstorms, mirages, heat hazes."

Is that a third-act location, we ask, or is this more The Temple Of Doom than The Last Crusade, more *Drake's Fortune* than *Among Thieves*? "It's hard to give even a rough estimation, since Drake will be adventuring through several environments that are nearby and even in the desert, but aren't what would be traditionally thought of as a desert," hints studio co-president **Evan Wells**. "And there'll be quite a bit of globetrotting through areas that aren't even remotely sandy. Maybe the best way to describe it is to say it's comparable to how much of *Uncharted 2* was in the snow."





The Chateau is not something you put together overnight. It's a pretty conventional episode that, technical upgrades aside, could happily sit in any *Uncharted.* Expect much bigger and better

"We're driven by artists, and it's the job of the programmers to make it fit, in terms of memory and framerate. The artists will always go beyond what we have at our disposal"

To prove his point, all that's presentable of *Drake's Deception* so far is the 'Chateau' level, the debug option for which sits ominously below a reference to 'spider cave'. Studio historians will recognise that name from *Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy*, which is where our speculation ends. Lasting about ten minutes, Chateau is like a fiery version of Bruce Lee's Game Of Death, a vertical gauntlet of traversal, gunplay and fisticuffs set in a beautifully detailed, collapsing interior engulfed in flame. It begins with a couple of oil drums being toppled and set alight, and ends with a cliffhanger several storeys up. How the enemy soldiers in between were supposed to escape is anyone's guess. Perhaps they weren't.

Much is as you'd expect, but pretty much everything's improved. Weapons and ammo are now grabbed automatically, the only control concern being what and where you shoot. Combat now embraces brawl mechanics and AI, and it isn't long before Drake is grabbed from behind, fending off a second assailant with his boot. A host of contextual disarms add a new dimension to melee combat, and an important stitch in Drake's overall animation flow; in one exchange, he grapples an automatic rifle from his opponent. The climbing animations are more diverse, meaning he can now reach backwards to handle overhanging ledges.

The most important of *Uncharted* might well be animation, in fact; it's at the core of the game's language. With 32 cameras inherited from Robert Zemeckis' Beowulf, the studio's mo-cap facility has a bigger brother a few miles down the road. Hennig says they're two of the most important factors in making players "feel a part" of Drake's world.

Of course, you have to build that world first, which at the forefront of PS3 development is easier said than done. And that, to put it crudely, is pretty much how *Uncharted* comes together. "We shoot for the Moon, which is what the artists want to see," says Balestra. "We're driven by artists, and it's the job of the programmers to make it fit, in terms of memory and framerate. The artists will always go beyond what we have at our disposal, and Chateau is a perfect example."

"We put in way more particles than we could possibly ever render," adds lead designer **Justin Richmond**. "We made it look exactly like the paintovers the concept guys did, and we asked: 'How are we going to make this work?'"

Balestra has an analogy that goes some way to answering that, involving the "six-lane freeway" of working with PS3's SPUs. If *Uncharted* used two of those lanes, then *Uncharted 2* used all six but at street-car levels of performance; *Uncharted 3* is more like Formula 1. "We're at full speed, optimising code specifically for the SPUs," he explains. "Everyone was complaining when [PS3] came out because



The 3D models of Drake and Sully have been enhanced (along with those of characters Naughty Dog refuses to acknowledge right now), and the result should be the best-looking PS3 game to date

everything was about single processors. They wanted to work the same way, all very simple. But that's not how it works. If you look at Google, they have tons and tons of machines, even more complicated than having just six CPUs. Now people get it and they're really taking advantage. It's a great resource because [the SPUs] are extremely fast, and if you optimise, they get faster than you ever thought they could be. That's where the quality of our images comes from."

You know the routine. You might even have seen the video. An environment of seemingly infinite complexity, the Chateau level is wrapped in every visual effect its chosen element – in this case, fire – is famous for. No two adjacent objects look alike. And by objects, we mean the tiles and bricks that come away beneath Drake's hands, causing an avalanche of scenery – walls, floors, glass, wardrobes – to rush past the dynamic camera. There's a chandelier swing, tables tipped over to make cover, escape routes collapsing to make ever-unlikelier escape routes. And there's Sully, ducking and diving naturally between roles of signpost, narrator, emotional manipulator and difficulty adjuster.

"When we do our big traversal sequences, we don't want the player to have [camera] control because they'll always be looking in the wrong direction," says Richmond. "But when we know something's going to be free-roaming, we know to make sure there are enough interest points. When we're doing the Chateau, you've got to think: 'I really am trapped in here. There really is only one way out.' So we're trying to make sure the player

"A great Move game is a game made around Move, and we started Uncharted long before that. It would be very difficult for us to just adapt it. We tried, but it wasn't making sense"

feels what we want them to feel. What we don't want is the fatigue thing where it's so epic for so long that you don't care any more."

Fiction is fragile, and the studio knows it. Nowhere is there greater risk of bombing your audience to sleep than in the thirdperson action genre, and nowhere tempts you to jump the shark more than putting 'pulp' in your pitch. Moreover, if you're following in or around the footsteps of Indiana Jones, you probably know the worst pitfall of all: 'nuking the fridge'.

"I love Indiana Jones. That, not so much," admits Richmond of movie number four, The Kingdom Of The Crystal Skull. "I love the character and I love certain aspects of the fourth one, but it wasn't a very solid film. It's hard. It's one of those things where you see what you remember from when you saw it at 14, and you lose some of that childlike wonder. But I don't think it was true to the character. And it was one of those projects where it had been going on for years, with a million scripts. Even in games you hear of these projects where it takes them years to figure out." He looks over at his colleague and there's a pause. "I don't remember it," says Balestra.

What would constitute nuking the fridge in *Uncharted*? "It's tough," says Hennig. "It's a genre that has some rules, and if you start deviating from the conventions you start moving out of the genre, and that's one of the things that make the games as nostalgic and beloved as they are for people. There's an interesting bargain for us there creatively. Can we twist it up in a way that's unexpected? Can we contemporise it in a way that isn't cheesy or retro? If it kills the suspension of disbelief and your relation to the hero, you blew it."

Would the studio – *will* it – kill a character for the sake of surprise? Is the principal cast expendable? "If it was the right thing to do for the story or franchise then yeah, we'd do that," Hennig says. "The thing to keep in mind, though, is that even though we have dramatic elements, we're not strictly a drama. There's a lot of comedy to what we do, even romantic comedy and screwball comedy. Anything that would absolutely kill our ability to be funny ever again would be a bad decision, so that's one metric that we use. And there's knee-jerk thoughts on how you make your stories more edgy and dramatic – it's almost a fan-fiction thing: 'Look how dramatic and emo we are.'"

At this early stage, cautionary tales like Indy 4's will actually tell you more about *Drake's Deception* than a straight 'So, what's the multiplayer like?' Naughty Dog won't be drawn on bullet-point features beyond promises that multiplayer, to use that example, will be a "massive component" this time. The studio had fun making the previous game's online modes and the fans liked playing them, so it's full steam ahead in that department. Richmond also tells us of "huge improvements to Cinema Mode coming down the pipe." High-resolution output? Singleplayer support? Possibly the first one,



depending on the memory issues which unfortunately rule out the second.

Balestra insists that the first game's choice to include Sixaxis tilt support, meanwhile, was entirely the studio's own, and that with similar authority it has presently turned down PlayStation Move. "A great Move game is a game made around Move, and we started *Uncharted* long before that," he says. "It would be very difficult for us to just adapt it. We tried a couple of things but it wasn't making a lot of sense." The game *will* feature stereoscopic 3D, though, which apparently works wonders in the Chateau level where fiery particles dance in the air while, as you ascend, the camera stares increasingly into a molten abyss. "We've always been aware of the camera with our game, and tried to make the game look really deep," says Richmond. "So it does benefit what we do."

If you're looking for an apology for an announcement short on modes and plot details, the best we can offer is Wells' remark that the studio wants to "move the medium beyond the bullet-point list: two car chases, an exploding helicopter, etc. We'd love to get away from relying on that."

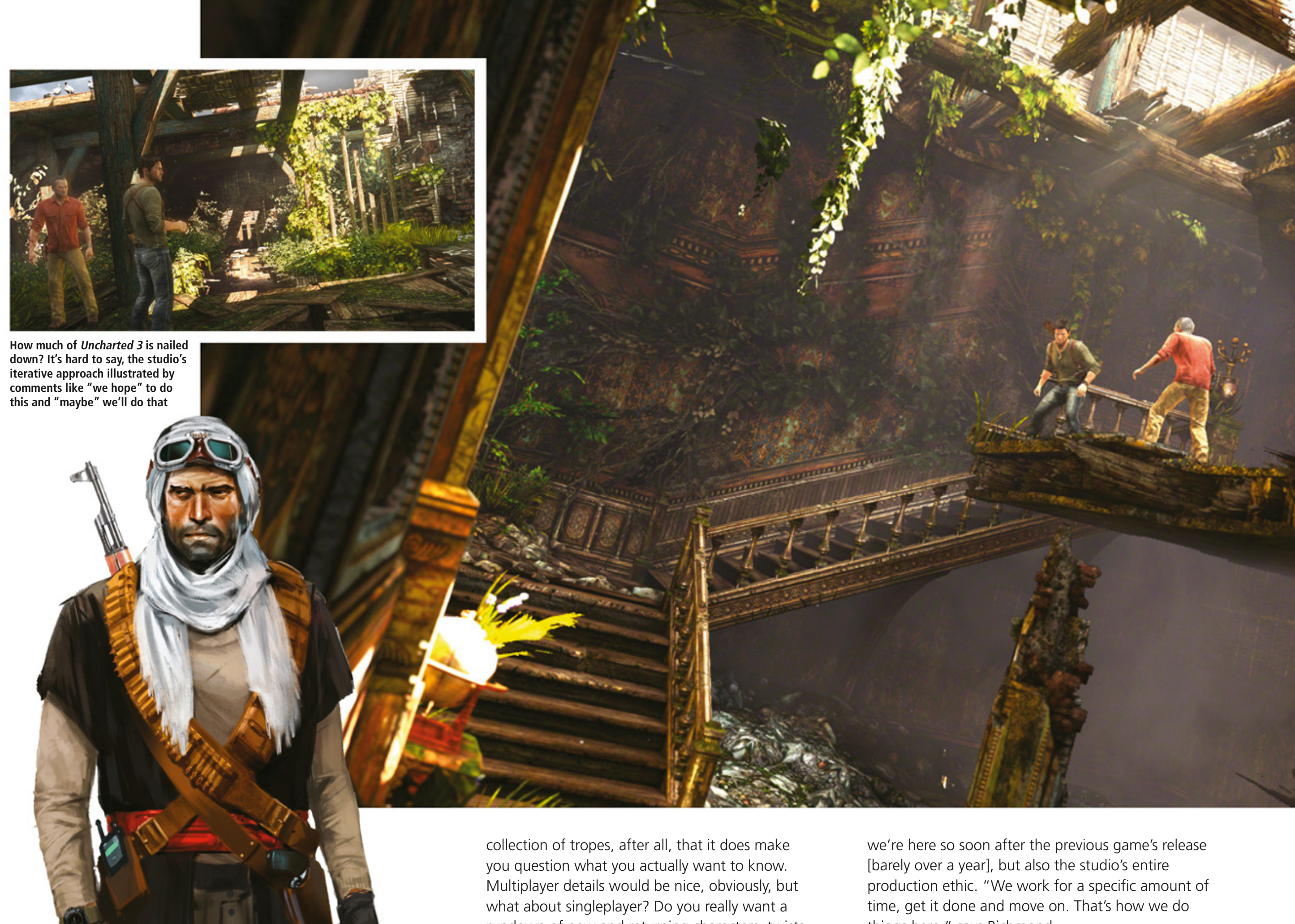
Perhaps it already has. *Uncharted* is such a

SHADOW OF THE ICO

They don't like comparing *Uncharted* to its peers, but that doesn't stop the Naughty Dog team saying what they like. Top of the list are Team Ico's adventures, which Hennig admires for their minimalist narrative and readiness to let the audience tell their own stories. "In some ways, while we are trying to tell a story in a game, it's about how much you engage the player as interpreter," she says. "Now, that's tough in our genre, right? If we tried that, it'd be like mixing metaphors. It needs more overt exposition both in terms of story and character. On the other hand, you don't have to lay everything out, so we make our little inroads where we can, leaving it to the player to interpret meanings."



The flora on display illustrates Naughty Dog's progress with its experimentions in digital vegetation since the release of the first *Uncharted* in 2007



How much of *Uncharted 3* is nailed down? It's hard to say, the studio's iterative approach illustrated by comments like "we hope" to do this and "maybe" we'll do that

THROW IN THE TOWEL

We haven't seen much sand, but a cursory glance across darkened desks at least reveals a desert outfit based as much on modern-day explorers as the likes of Peter O'Toole's Lawrence or Ralph Fiennes in The English Patient. The most prominent feature is the Shemagh headscarf, casually worn to the leave Drake's face on show. We'll go out on a limb here and suggest that it's not the most practical getup for rough-and-tumble gymnastics, suggesting either a cutscene or a section dedicated to exploration. The Chateau demo, meanwhile, sees Drake in his usual civvies.

collection of tropes, after all, that it does make you question what you actually want to know. Multiplayer details would be nice, obviously, but what about singleplayer? Do you really want a rundown of new and returning characters, twists, turns, locations and boss battles? Or would you rather know if those boss battles are going to be rubbish? Rubbish like a man, on a train, in a vest, with grenades, who won't die…

"It wasn't me, I swear to God!" cries Richmond as we bring up Lieutenant Draza, the gatekeeper who concludes the train level in *Among Thieves* on something of a sour note. "We needed to have Draza be an actual character. We needed a villain in the train, and you knew he was up ahead of you holding Chloe and all these sorts of things. In the end, we ran out of time to train the player that he needed to be shot and then punched – it was a communication problem. It just wasn't well designed. It came in really, really late and bit us in the ass. But lesson learned – we won't make that mistake again." Balestra nods: "We'll find another one."

Richmond confesses similar dissatisfaction with the battle against The Descendents in *Drake's Fortune*, which fell into the same trap of demanding something (blindfire) the game hadn't adequately trained you for. "It was a player language issue. If the player ever does not understand what they're trying to do, it's a problem." So, yes, you live and learn – which is a maxim that explains not just why we're here so soon after the previous game's release [barely over a year], but also the studio's entire production ethic. "We work for a specific amount of time, get it done and move on. That's how we do things here," says Richmond.

It's an interesting dichotomy, on the one hand working to a strict, self-imposed schedule while on the other having the disc "ripped out of your hands as it's going out the door," as Wells puts it. "It's the freedom-to-fail idea," explains Hennig. "I think that's part of Naughty Dog's success in the industry: despite our size, we still act like there's a dozen of us. If we try an idea and it sucks… We'll probably go through a half-dozen to ten iterations of something before we decide if we like it or whether to abandon it. An organisation that was more rigid would just never make something good, because your first go is always awful."

Drake's Deception, it's suggested, will have just as many boss battles as its predecessor, "but as developers and designers we have to re-evaluate what that means," says Hennig. "Sometimes a literal fight between two individuals is not what you need." Much the same goes for tutorials, which in a third instalment can be tricky. How do you teach newcomers without subjecting veterans to a thinly disguised orientation exercise, which some might argue got the second game off to a shambling, if spectacular, start?

"We usually stretch this out over several hours so that it never feels like a tutorial, and we have some





Will a certain antipodean love interest return? "Rest assured that some of the characters from the past games will," Wells says. "Female characters are an important part of the pulp genre and you can count on Drake being tangled up in some new and interesting ways with the women he comes across. However, the most important relationship is the one between Drake and Sully. We want to explain more about how they wound up in the father/son-like relationship they have and exactly how far that bond extends."

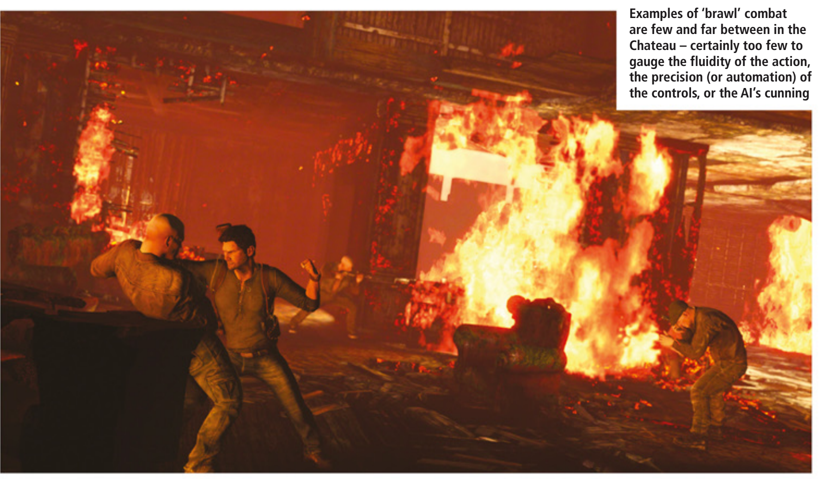
Titles can be very useful in the pulp genre, especially when dealing with evasion like this. We've had the boisterous and almost jovial *Fortune*, and seen a change in tenor that justified *Among Thieves*, a title that implies mercenary ambitions and disposable friendships. But '*Deception*' is downright sinister, signalling the series' darkest episode so far. In the shifting sands of the world's most hostile environment, the most interesting development will be the one that few games really know how to deal with: the role of the bad guy.

Balestra agrees that it's difficult to get right, and one area in which the rules of cinematic action simply don't line up with cinema itself. "You can't see the bad guy's point of view for a start," he says. "Not in the type of game we're doing." Recalling the line in *Uncharted 2* when villain Zoran Lazarevic tackles the issue head-on – "You think I am a monster. But you're no different from me, Drake. How many men have you killed? How many, just today?" – Richmond adds that you can't ignore player bloodlust, the need to keep 'heroically' shooting people.

"Amy is really pushing to have the non-warlord villain, more the Ben Linus type who's going to mess with your mind," he says. "They're not going to attack you outright, which is partly where the name comes from: *Deception*. What does that mean in terms of AI reactions, what they're doing in the game? What does that mean for Drake, for gameplay? Even if you did the exact same style of villain you do in a movie, games are six to eight hours long. It's so much easier in a movie to make a Hans Gruber, for instance, where all he has to do is keep a building on lockdown."

Games and movies have one thing in common, at least: thematic 'throwbacks' to a bygone age – especially the ones admired by Naughty Dog and its fans – often involve techniques of the future. The urge to revisit flights of fantasy bound by old technology is irresistible – just ask George Lucas, who ended up revisiting himself – and you can hear it in Hennig's voice when she beams: "They have to figure out location budgets; the only thing limiting us is imagination. Each game is about moving that goal farther and farther down the field, smoothing out the rough edges, and adding new features to move the game closer to that ideal of the interactive cinematic experience."

"The most important relationship is the one between Drake and Sully. We want to explain more about how they wound up in the father/son-like relationship and how far that bond extends"



Examples of 'brawl' combat are few and far between in the Chateau – certainly too few to gauge the fluidity of the action, the precision (or automation) of the controls, or the AI's cunning

Continued

very interesting scenarios lined up in *Uncharted 3*," says Wells. "We look at each iteration of the game as a standalone and don't make any assumptions that players will know how to play. And, as always, we weave our tutorials into gameplay and story so that players aren't necessarily realising they're being taught the controls. It's not really a matter of catering to newcomers or veterans – we want to pace the game well for everyone, which usually means starting off with a bang."

And then? Still no specifics. Plenty of reassurances, though. "Drake is certainly going to find himself in some crazy situations, but we're also going to have important breaks in the action that will give the players a chance to catch their breath and get prepared for whatever's coming next," Wells says. "We have a rich palette to choose from – the history of the world, and all the different parts you can explore. We've got a pretty wide narrative plain. And we don't want to get too predictable."



Brief history lesson: Victor 'Sully' Sullivan is to Drake what Lando Calrissian is to Han Solo, a scoundrel and swindler whose circumstances cast shadows over his loyalty, however true it seems



THE FINAL CUT

Epic cinema deserves bonus features. Some further thoughts, then, from gaming's foremost interactive moviemakers

We gather together Evan Wells, Justin Richmond, Christophe Balestra and Amy Hennig to talk *Tomb Raider*, linear storytelling and mutant plants.

***Uncharted* is one of the few series where the artwork never feels constrained by technology.**
Evan Wells: That's the great thing about working at Naughty Dog: you've got these great artists who are super-technical and you've got these great programmers who are super-artistic. They really work well together and know what they need to provide.

***Uncharted 2*'s village section was very popular. Is that idea of striking contrasts between propulsive action and quieter exploration going to be expanded this time?**
EW: It's more about providing that cinematic experience and making you an active part of it. You can't just leave it turned to ten the whole time; you've got to create the peaks and the valleys. So the village was just an example: you just came off the low point of the train wreck just before that and you've got the exciting exploration of the ice cave coming up, so we wanted to give the player a little valley there, a chance to recuperate.
Amy Hennig: And it was the appropriate emotional tone to hit at that point in the story. We have to look at it as a whole. For a lot of people, unfortunately, story's a kind of afterthought. If a game's really good then sometimes you don't mind. We do a lot of focus testing for this, not just for gameplay-stoppers. We don't want people to feel like it's time to put the controller down, we want them to be emotionally and viscerally propelled, and giving them the up and down on the ride has a lot to do with that. And that comes from narrative, and film specifically.

You make it sound obvious, which in the film industry it would be. But then you look at the early *Call Of Duty* games, where there's little contrast at all.
AH: And it's exhausting.

Do gamers need to demand more in that respect? You don't hear many criticisms of things like pace and contrast.
AH: I don't know if people know to articulate it as a complaint or even a desire, but…
EW: They appreciate it when they see it.
AH: Exactly. And we've seen that in the reaction to our game. People say it feels like playing a movie, though, and that their whole family gathers around to watch them play. Those are the signposts for us that we've done our job right.
EW: Especially when people say they enjoy just watching it. Because if a game's dialled constantly to ten then a passive viewer's going to get bored faster than the person playing it.

Was *Uncharted 2* as good as everyone said?
AH: Not *everyone* said that.
EW: It was unexpected to get that kind of reaction. You always see the flaws, and you're clinging to the disc until the very last minute to fix the last bug or add a last bit of polish, and you just have your fingers crossed when it goes it. We're on pins and needles waiting for that first review score.

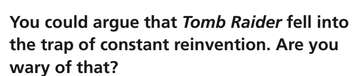
We do end up talking about other games, and we were concerned that our game isn't the most testosterone-fuelled game that appeals to the lowest common denominator. So definitely we had concerns that people wouldn't be into having so much story. You hear people complain about cutscenes, saying they should be interactive…
AH: Or that games shouldn't have stories [rolls eyes].

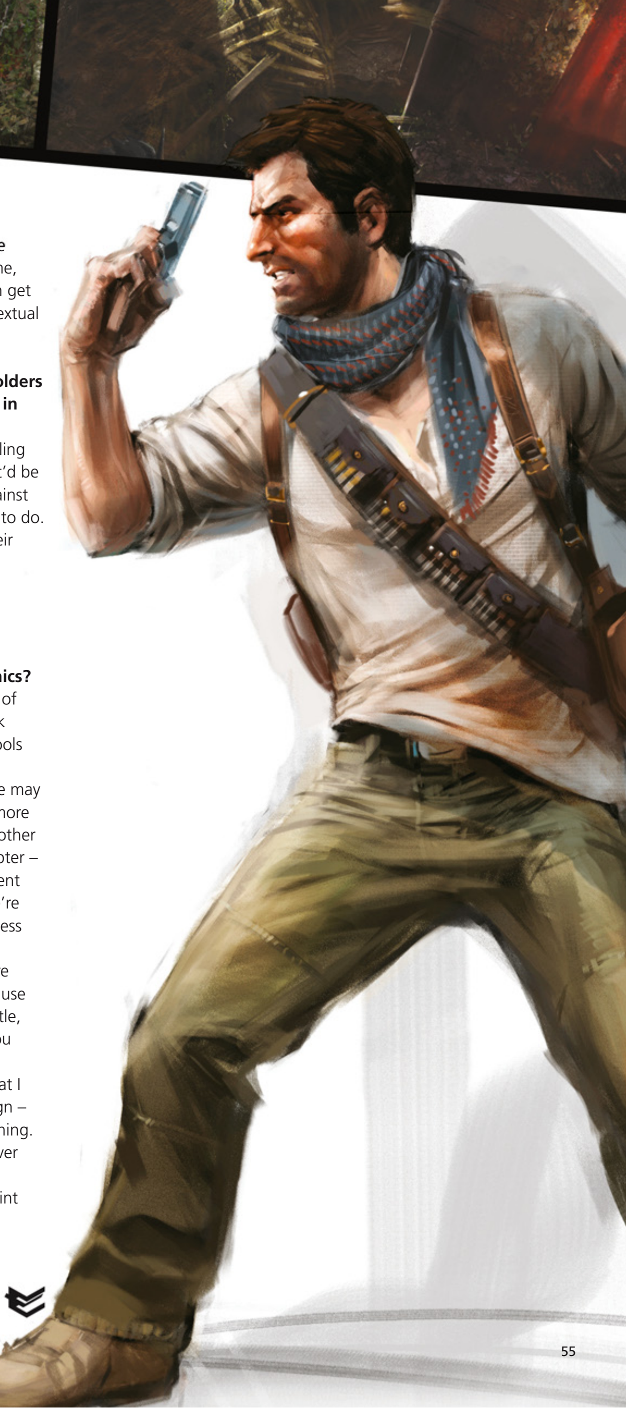
Does a linear story demand linear gameplay?
Justin Richmond: I don't know if it demands it; it's the choice that we made and it was the choice that was right for the *Uncharted* universe. We want to be that breathless, very tight, make the player feel what Drake is feeling, tell the story that we want to tell. It demands certain things and one of those is that it's more linear. But if you're talking broadly, no. You could make an action adventure game that would tell a story without being linear, but it would take a lot of work and it would be different. I don't think it's been done yet but it could be done.

You could see in both the *Uncharted* games that players really feel like they're making their way through the environment, experiencing what Drake's experiencing. And we never cut away from Drake, so everything is working towards that goal. Now, that doesn't mean that in any given setup we can't let you do multiple things, but it does demand that certain things happen at certain times.
Christophe Balestra: And if we were to have a game where you could have choices, at the same quality, it would take us five or six years. It would be insane, and I don't think the team could keep up with it. We'd like to ship games at a constant rate… I've seen games that have been worked on for six or seven years. I don't know how people do it.

Does it surprise you that there aren't more games like this?
AH: It's our favourite kind of game collectively. We make the kinds of games that we love, and we'd love to see more games like it out there. But it's hard to do – and that's not to disparage everyone else's efforts. I'm not ranking any of it. But it's kind of what I was trying to say – it involves constantly reminding ourselves what that touchstone is. Because it's really easy to slip into: "This'll be awesome." You have to ask yourself why.
EW: And it's about not making story an afterthought. A lot of games hire actors, record dialogue and tell a story, but if it's not your stated goal from the beginning, day one, to integrate it with the gameplay, it's not something you can shoehorn in.
AH: Or you can't treat it that way. I don't want anyone to think we put story above gameplay – when we're blocking out the game we're looking from both angles constantly. It's not just a gameplay or story storyboard, it's both. So, for instance, on the last game we knew we wanted to tackle the whole idea of moving objects, so we could do trains, convoys, collapsing buildings and all that stuff. So we said: "Let's do a train." We didn't know where it was going from or to, why he was on it, why you'd move from the back to the front…
EW: We thought it'd be cool if it wrecked, though.
AH: So a lot of it comes from thinking something's cool, but the responsibility is to make sure it makes sense; why should the player care? So it has to culminate in a down moment for the player, and before that you have a falling-out. So not only are you going to rescue someone you care about, the tension, but not even knowing if they want to be rescued. It gives the whole thing an emotional tenor it might not have had otherwise. It's not just about wanting to see what set-piece happens next.







You could argue that *Tomb Raider* fell into the trap of constant reinvention. Are you wary of that?
JR: Yeah. It's like anything, right? You see it in the movies. They constantly reboot things you just saw ten years ago. You're like: "Wait a minute, I just saw that!" Spider-Man is just ridiculous. It's something you have be careful of with any kind of creative endeavour, and the lure to reinvent yourself is always there. But one of the good things is that we feel we're not done with Drake yet; we haven't done all we wanted to do, and there are still technical hurdles and goals we want to get over, and do even more stuff in gameplay.

I could definitely foresee us having it in the future, but if we felt we were bored of it then we wouldn't wreck the franchise, we'd do something else. We're very cognisant of the legacy of what Drake is, and that every game should advance the story and the genre.
CB: And most of the people on the team are the same. I don't know about *Tomb Raider*, or whether they had problems with a new team coming in and saying: "Right. Fuck what they did – we're doing it different."

How adventurous do you plan to be with the gameplay associated with an AI partner?
EW: We don't look at our NPCs as gameplay mechanics, but as critical components of the cinematic experience we're creating. Where we'll get adventurous is with the rollercoaster ride of emotions and situations that Drake and his companions find themselves in, and how it challenges them as characters.

What are the most drastic changes in AI and combat we can expect as a result of the new brawl mechanics?
EW: It's going to change both how the player decides to take on the enemies, as well as how the AI attacks the player. With the new brawl mechanics, the player might choose to engage certain enemies in melee combat more often in order to take advantage of the disarm moves that will leave them ready to fire a new weapon. And the enemies will now be able to face off with Drake in multiples and even team up and hold him in place while others get to take shots at him. It creates a new feel to the hand-to-hand combat that can occur at any time, and allows us to set up scenarios where we can get a real bar-room brawl feel, complete with contextual attacks and improvised weapons.

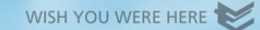
Conspiracy theorists think that platform holders force things like Move and Sixaxis on devs in order to promote their adoption. True?
CB: Sony's never said that to us. They're not telling us we have to use Sixaxis or Move. They'll say it'd be nice, of course, but they're not going to go against our judgement if we say it's not the right thing to do.
JR: They're always going to ask us to put all their crazy stuff in there and see if it works, but they accept it when it doesn't.

You're very candid about boss battles that didn't work, but are you happy with them in principle, those problem-solving mechanics?
JR: I don't know that we'll do exactly that kind of thing in this game, but dogmatically, yes, I think problem solving is fine if you give the players tools to succeed, and if they use those intelligently throughout the game and they succeed. But we may be better off doing something else, where it's more the environment trying to kill you. But we had other boss battles that worked – the tank, the helicopter – because you understood them. They're a different kind of boss battle, and that's sort of where we're leaning towards. But it's pretty early in the process and we don't really know yet.
AH: The problem with boss battles is that you're introducing mechanics. You want the player to use the tools at their disposal to take on a boss battle, but when you're dealing with human bosses you have to almost break your own rules and set limitations to make it a puzzle, if you know what I mean. I think that's what makes it hard to design – it feels like you've thrown a wrench into everything. I'm not a fan of them. As a player I'd rather never face another one. I'm not interested. I can't tell you how many games I've put down at that point and just gone: "OK, I'm done."

So long as you're not doing mutant plants this time…
AH: Ah, shoot. Back to the drawing board.



This remarkable landscape is not likely to be released as a game level due to its intense detail. It's *Final Fantasy XIV*'s world of Eorzea, taken to new heights by modder Ulysses182



Wish you were here

Do new benchmarks, new APIs and a new wave of game engines signal a new era for PC graphics? The second part of our PC feature takes a look

The law of diminishing returns is well understood by videogames. Characters, stories, aesthetics, business models, brands, mechanics, marketing ploys: all have a tendency to outstay their welcome. Such are the economics of creation. But there's one area that players – PC players, in particular – have long considered exempt: graphics. Historically, the only thing tiring about those has been keeping up with them.

Consider this, though. In 2006, leading PC games included *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, *Call Of Duty 3*, *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, *Hitman: Blood Money*, *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* and *Splinter Cell: Double Agent*. Now, four years later, the publishers of those games have given us *Fallout: New Vegas*, *Call Of Duty: Black Ops*, *Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days*, *Lost Planet 2* and *Splinter Cell: Conviction*. In comparison, it took just three years for *Doom* to become *Quake*, *Quake* to become *Quake III*, and *Far Cry* to become *Crysis*.

"There are diminishing returns," agrees **Jaakko Haapasalo**, head of Futuremark Game Studio, "but only in the near-term. Even though things are now slowing, occasionally there'll be larger jumps that are harder to predict. We're still very far from photorealism, for example, if you want to hold that as a gold standard." **James Gallagher**, Futuremark's head of marketing, chips in: "To borrow your examples, the shift towards consoles as lead development platforms has certainly held back the progress of game graphics on PC. That said, with consoles determined to extend current-gen lifecycles through whatever





means they can, and with DirectX 11 PCs out-powering consoles by an ever-widening margin, maybe we'll see the pace of change on PC pick up again in the next few years."

We tackled the issue of console-driven PC games in **E**222 – the cruel economics, cultural neglect and justifiable frustrations. Isn't it time for a comeback? It stands to reason that without a resurgence in PC game R&D, the consoles of tomorrow will have nothing new to play with. Gallagher suggests we look to the usual suspects for signs of what's to come – id Software's *Rage* and Epic's Unreal Engine 4, for example – but there's that grievance again: what used to be upfront PC development today feels like secret next-gen console development. A timely *Unreal Tournament 4* would be a great PC benchmark, but for now we're getting *Gears Of War 3* and *BulletStorm* instead.

MEGA DRIVE

PC games might struggle to do it differently in the multiplatform age, but at least they (usually) do it better. Powerhouse anti-aliasing options, DirectX gimmicks and modded textures and lighting are obvious plusses, but one of the more recent – and remarkable – is the adoption of solid-state storage drives by top-end gaming rigs. With prices dropping and capacities rising, lightning-fast SSDs are now a feasible alternative to platter-based hard drives. We obtained a test system from Intel to see how they fared, and the difference was more than just seconds off the Windows 7 boot time. The initial load for *GTAIV*, race loads in *Dirt 2* and the general load times of *Mafia II* were drastically cut, if not halved. Steam, a real chugger on our comparable HDD rig, loaded to the game list instantly. *Fallout 3* modding, meanwhile, no longer led to a stutter-fest.

Obviously, Epic's technical wizards aren't sitting on their wands. CEO **Tim Sweeney** has hardly been reticent about the PC market, declaring in 2008 that "consoles have definitely left PC games behind." Other keynote highlights of his include the death of GPUs as we know them and, again in 2008, a next generation where "we'll write 100 per cent of our rendering code in a real programming language – not DirectX, not OpenGL." Unreal Engine 4, meanwhile, has been something of a known unknown for years. You only have to look at *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West* and the aforementioned *BulletStorm* to see the profound benefits of its new Lightmass Global Illumination software, while *BioShock Infinite* continues to wring out Autodesk's Beast GI, a recent addition to both Unreal and Unity3D.

But, as Futuremark suggests, this is progress within a very tight envelope defined by ageing consoles. It's DirectX 9 tech targeting low-memory machines at a time when enthusiast PCs pack 6GB of RAM and DX11 graphics cards. Breakthroughs in parallelism (working with multiple CPU cores) are being made across all formats, but that's just part of the equation. Subject to multiplatform inertia, PC games are still struggling to show off that top-end hardware. To put it less delicately, they're not giving us what we're paying for.

"The current generation of DX11-enabled games that are using features like tessellation [the procedural generation of complex geometry out of limited data sets,





Sebastian Andor's work with CryEngine 2, showcased across this spread, would pass without question for a decent CG movie. It would also bring a modern realtime game to a standstill. Tessellation is just one of the avenues developers have to consider

"It's hard for developers to justify putting so much effort into ensuring compatibility across platforms when they can just make that game on console"

saving resources], they're being done by supplementing an existing engine and graphics pipeline," says Haapasalo. Gallagher concurs: "It's always just a bit of eye-candy or embellishment. It's never used for anything gameplay-related because they have to port the basic game at DX9 on the lowest possible card they can find. It's hard for a lot of developers to justify putting so much effort into ensuring compatibility across the different platforms when they can just make that base game on console.

"If you think about what you could do with atmospheric volumetric lighting, the sort of games you could create where it was an actual gameplay element rather than a bit of extra gloss on the stands in a racing game, then you'd actually be able to have those comparison shots and say, 'This is using this technology to the max'."

Anyone who's paid upwards of £200 for a DX10 or DX11 graphics card knows exactly which 'comparison shots' he's talking about. When DX10 came around it was *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition*, *BioShock*, *Stalker: Clear Sky* and *Company Of Heroes*; for DX11, *Stalker: Call Of Pripyat*, *Dirt 2*, *Aliens Vs Predator* and *Metro 2033*. Typical reactions from the gaming community were: "Huh?" "Where?" "How much again?" You paid for the future of gaming and instead you got Spot The Difference. As for PhysX, the equally maligned hardware physics solution from Nvidia, that's something we address on p63.

With one notable exception, even the games that highlight generational differences between console and PC graphics do so through art pipelines more than APIs or tech – games such as *Mirror's Edge*, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and the aforementioned *Stalker*s. Occasionally, you'll get one that uses system-crushing brute force like *Napoleon: Total War*, making quieter breakthroughs like parallel pathfinding for its AI. But for an unabashed look at what PCs can actually do, the game of this generation is the one we haven't mentioned: *Crysis*.

We awarded Crytek's game high marks in **E**183 in part because its free Sandbox 2 editor put a world-conquering game engine in the hands of the global community, setting up all kinds of possibilities for mods and their creators. Thanks to CryMod, however, the studio's thriving online community, it's given us something more: a crystal ball. Nowhere is the power of modern PCs more potently and publicly displayed.

"The best thing about it is that they have no commercial pressure," says Crytek CEO **Cevat Yerli**. "I honestly think our community has given us visual impressions of next-generation games. Those guys are going to be the developers of tomorrow's game content, and are pushing the engine to limits ahead of home entertainment technology."

One of them, **Sebastian Andor**, has pushed it so far that he couldn't even make a game if he wanted to, which apparently he doesn't. Working with production collective VAM United, his use of CryEngine is feature-film pre-visualisation – in this instance, a genre-bending island escapade in the spirit of Lost. Technically and often artistically, his in-engine work is better than anything seen in videogames in the last year, employing custom features such as bespoke motion blur, shaders and 'bokeh' depth of field.

Seeing his work more as a "cinematic remix" of CryEngine than next-gen development, Andor believes that effects

3DMark 11 Depth of Field Off

3DMark 11 Depth of Field On

3DMark 11 Volumetric Lighting Off

3DMark 11 Volumetric Lighting On

Though still uncommon in game applications, depth-of-field effects (top right) can be valuable visual tools. Extreme god rays (above right), meanwhile, were among the DX10 showpieces of *Stalker: Clear Sky*, infamous for crippling framerate drops

such as bokeh are achievable in many current engines, including Unity and Unreal. "The problem," he says, "is interactivity. With a realtime engine you can, if you want, increase the quality so much that even a high-end computer from the near future wouldn't be able to maintain a playable framerate. But you could implement 'cheaper-looking' depth of field, which is the method used by current engines."

Has his work found its way into Crytek's own development? He's not at liberty to say, which probably tells you everything. He is, though, keen to stress that CryEngine is "the most advanced realtime engine there is," and he's "sorry that many 3D artists don't know that, or are unable to see it." What excites him most about PC graphics today? "The trend to increase and even match the quality of an offline renderer like Mental Ray or Vray and, with the convergence of the game industry and film, the development of tools enabling a more cinematic approach in games. On the technical side, things like realtime ambient occlusion or even light bouncing, motion blur, or virtual cameras with accurate parameters."

"The current generation of development can basically do *Call Of Duty* and do it pretty well. That's not bad," says Haapasalo. "But you have to be thinking on a different level if you want to go beyond that visually, and we're getting to that level with things like tessellation, maybe, and evolved volumetrics. That's stuff you can't do with any reasonable fidelity on consoles.

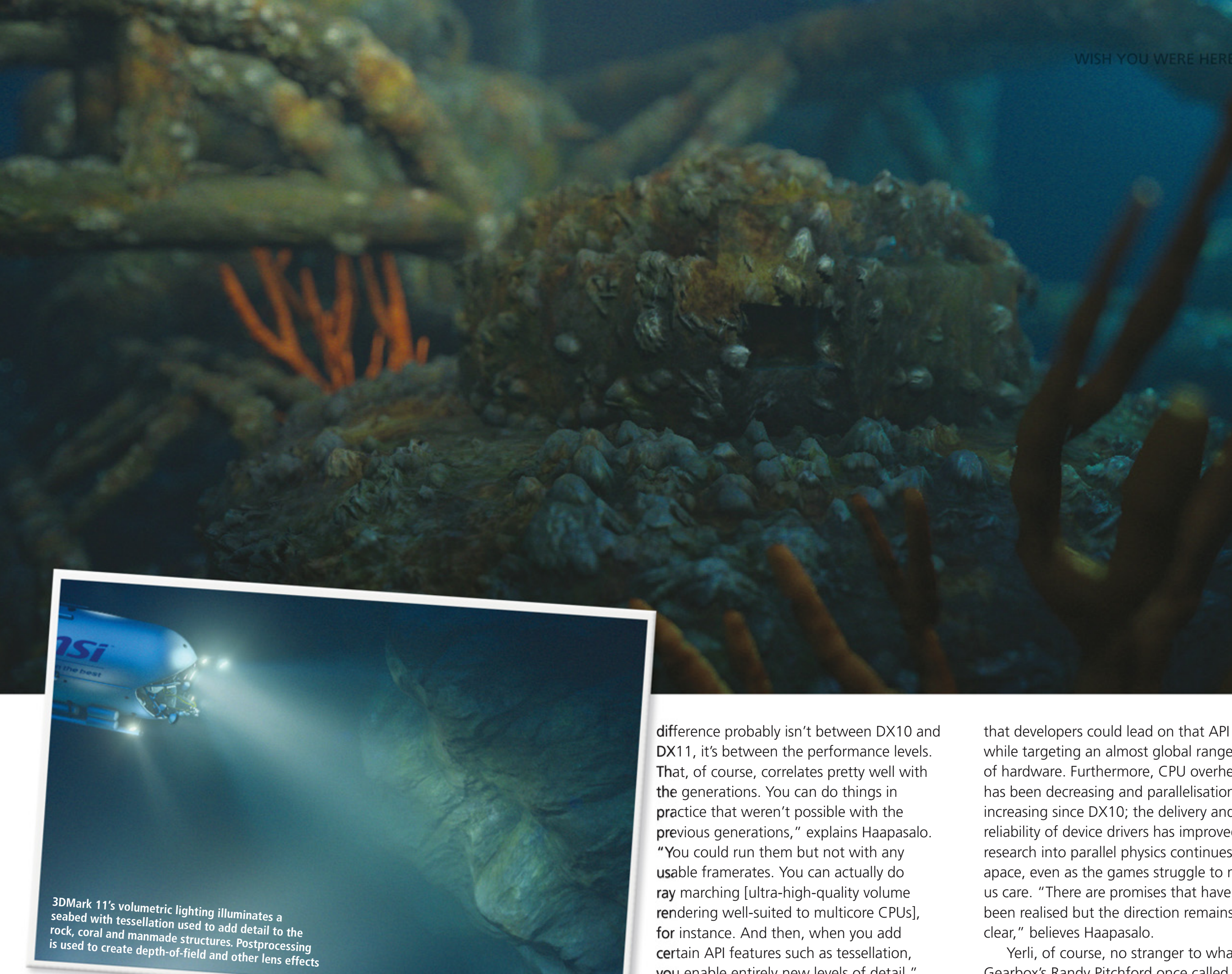
"It's not continuous change, it's a bunch of steps by which you reach a stage you couldn't have before. I've no doubt that consoles will evolve again, but what's going to be the next stage beyond that? It's an interesting question. I don't think we'll reach photorealism any time soon – not really next generation – and there's even a debate about which way you want to go. Cel-shading stuff has ironically popped up more as the technology progresses. What else is there? Are we going to converge on photorealism endlessly and in ever-smaller steps?"

At the time of writing, Futuremark was ready to launch its latest visual benchmark, 3DMark 11, in late November. It's an

"The current generation can basically do Call Of Duty and do it pretty well. That's not bad. But you have to be thinking on a different level"



AMD was first to market with its DX11 GPU family, while Nvidia's resources have apparently done more to encourage use of features such as distributed tessellation



3DMark 11's volumetric lighting illuminates a seabed with tessellation used to add detail to the rock, coral and manmade structures. Postprocessing is used to create depth-of-field and other lens effects

important release, a rare glimpse of features such as tessellation and volumetric lighting pushed to the forefront of PC-exclusive software and videogame scenarios. Last year, the studio's foray into actual game development, the zero-G multiplayer shooter *Shattered Horizon*, spoke volumes about the state of dedicated DX10 development. To wit, there wasn't much. And the unfortunate truth is that no one developer can fully explore such terrain – it takes an industry in concert. "Tessellation looks interesting to me, but it's difficult to say from my point of view whether it's going to be a killer feature or not," Haapasalo admits. "I'm hoping it will be. But we'll see what it actually adds."

Being 'just' an API, the switch to DX11 can't, he believes, singly improve the looks of modern videogames. "Performance may be some percentage points higher, but when the question becomes 'does the game make use of pervasive volumentric lighting?' the difference probably isn't between DX10 and DX11, it's between the performance levels. That, of course, correlates pretty well with the generations. You can do things in practice that weren't possible with the previous generations," explains Haapasalo. "You could run them but not with any usable framerates. You can actually do ray marching [ultra-high-quality volume rendering well-suited to multicore CPUs], for instance. And then, when you add certain API features such as tessellation, you enable entirely new levels of detail."

"And some interesting visual trade-offs become available," says **Ilkka Koho**, senior manager of Futuremark's PC products. "I can give you an example of an internal prototype that makes very heavy use of particle-based volumetrics, and global illumination volumes in conjunction with that. For certain types of scenes we're toying around with, we fill them with very thick, non-homogenic clouds and smoke and such, and really turn the scattering to the maximum. And we actually noticed that if we take this far enough, maybe we don't have to texture most of the surfaces at all. All the variation comes from the medium. It's a bit extreme, but I think it's a good example of the kinds of large trade-offs you could do in visuals, and still retain a very interesting look."

Futuremark is optimistic about the DX11 generation, which it sees as a potential successor to the decade-long DX9 generation. For one thing, DX11 has a downwards compatibility profile that "actually works," says Haapasalo, meaning that developers could lead on that API while targeting an almost global range of hardware. Furthermore, CPU overhead has been decreasing and parallelisation increasing since DX10; the delivery and reliability of device drivers has improved; research into parallel physics continues apace, even as the games struggle to make us care. "There are promises that haven't been realised but the direction remains clear," believes Haapasalo.

Yerli, of course, no stranger to what Gearbox's Randy Pitchford once called "generation-plus mode," was talking about this three years ago. Aside from Nvidia's exhaustive presentation archive from this year's GPU Technology Conference (www.nvidia.com/gtc2010-content), there are few better world views than the Crytek presentations at SIGGRAPH 2009 and 2010 – which aren't afraid to boast of where certain popular techniques originated. Perhaps inevitably, then, when you ask Yerli about tomorrow's PC gaming today, you're quickly time-warped to the year 2013.

"We're talking about much more freedom," he predicts, "both on the art side – what do you want to achieve from the game? – but also how you want to do it technically. Today you're pretty much limited to writing shaders. Some of it nowadays is computed but soon, I think with DX12 or alternative pipelines such as CUDA, or other stream pipelines from ATI or Intel, there'll be systems in place that allow much more freeform programming, in turn letting you try out new technologies such as raytracing

OPEN SEASON

The arrival of 3DMark11 in late 2010 left early DX11 card owners chomping at the bit somewhat, turning instead to another popular benchmark, Heaven, by Unigine. Heaven is significant as one of the first enthusiast releases to add support for OpenGL4.0, the open competitor to both DirectX and, via OpenCL, Nvidia's CUDA. Adding compute shaders and tessellation, the new OpenGL brings feature parity with DX11, the Khronos Group suggesting its latest specification, 4.1, even surpasses the functionality of Microsoft's API. Drivers from AMD/ATI and Nvidia now support the standard, to the chagrin of Apple owners still lumped with the OpenGL 2 and 3 of OSX. PC owners looking to give their tessellation a further workout, meanwhile, have a third benchmark to choose from: TessMark, available from Geeks3D.com.

Above: One of the better current examples of how hardware tessellation (without, left; with, right) can improve geometric complexity at a fraction of the usual cost. Above right: *Company Of Heroes* was the first game to support Direct3D 10, thanks to a 2007 patch

or point-based rendering. Again, that very clearly drives the look of the game, and hence can drive the feel of the experience."

In layman's terms, he continues, the issues faced by tomorrow's PC graphics are the gap between CG (of the Pixar kind) and game rendering. "Productions like Shrek or Ice Age have a higher fidelity of surfaces right now – smoother surfaces – a higher fidelity of texturing and generally smoother animation. We're looking at the same problem space here: we need more textures, more unique textures, and higher surface resolution on textures and polygons.

"On the animation side, we're talking improved IK simulations [techniques that, among other things, ensure a model's feet line up with the ground] and generally better animation blending techniques. So, it's surfaces, textures and movement. The model and texture quality cannot be pushed forward if the animation doesn't raise the bar itself – and it needs to catch up in a big way. If you're talking gaming technology in general, then AI is still the major area to improve, as well as physical simulations. It's the usual suspects."

> "What we're going to see, then, is a convergence of technologies in film and gaming. I truly mean a middleware that will run both games and film"

Brute-force setups such as SLI-arrayed graphics cards still have a place, he insists, and we're still far from the point of embracing pure computational power; technology simply isn't mature enough "to deal with truly next-gen development." But to echo Haapasalo's remark, the direction seems clear. Just as CryEngine continues to make prominent use of voxels, many older CPU techniques are being re-evaluated for modern realtime use.

"Can we do realtime micro-polygon rendering?" Yerli asks. "Can we do voxel raycasting in realtime? Can we animate those voxels in realtime? Can we create point-based physical simulations? There are an awful lot of questions we're looking at that come from traditional CGI. So can we do all those things while at the same time offering new types of content creation pipelines and gameplay experiences? Very often, the answer right now is still a resounding 'no'. If the PC platform is a generation ahead, that's effectively where we are CryEngine 3. But a generation that's 2013 and beyond needs different research going on today.

"What we're going to see, then, is a convergence of technologies used in film and gaming. And when I say convergence, I truly mean a middleware that will run both games and film. In 2013/4, you're going to have tools around – from Crytek at least – that will let people achieve that dream state that wasn't possible, wasn't simple enough before. We are going to deliver a unified platform."

The demise of the PC master race has been exaggerated, but, as we discovered in **E**222, perhaps not as greatly as many would like. Unification is definitely the word, and when it comes to the triple-A games of the foreseeable future – the ones that sell hardware – rarely will the PC go where consoles cannot follow. And with even current PCs pushing hard against the limits of power consumption and thermal envelopes – "It's difficult to build systems that would consume more power than the high end currently does," remarks Koho – the best hope for tomorrow's PC gaming might well be an age of parity: cheaper PCs and better consoles playing the same great-looking games, with the mutual respect and middleware to make that four-letter word, 'port', finally obsolete.



The way it's meant to be made?

Nvidia on PhysX, stereoscopic 3D and BMWs vs Ladas...

Whose job is it to ensure that when you buy a graphics card, you get what you're paying for? The same people whose job it is to ensure that when a developer spends money supporting that graphics card, it stands to get it back. Responsible for the chief 'enabler' in today's PC gaming, the GPU, companies like AMD and Nvidia are the platform holders, expected to support game makers as much as any Microsoft or Sony.

There's no bias in saying that when it comes to marketing that role, Nvidia has come out on top this generation. While card performance is broadly level – you won't particularly regret buying a DX11 Radeon or GeForce nowadays – it's hard not to think of brand-led initiatives without first thinking of 'The Way It's Meant To Be Played', the slogan that bombards you from the intros of numerous Unreal Engine games, among others. PhysX, the physics engine middleware acquired by Nvidia in 2008, has been thrust increasingly into both consciousness and computers, while 3D Vision does much the same for stereoscopic 3D.

Answering our questions on behalf of the GeForce manufacturer is a small army of marketing and support personnel: **Mike Skolones**, product manager and developer support manager for the PhysX SDK; **Lars Weinand**, senior marketing manager for Europe; **Nick Stam**, technical marketing director for Nvidia worldwide; and **Ben Berraondo**, GeForce PR manager.

***Batman: Arkham Asylum* is probably the most successful of Nvidia's high-profile collaborations. Why can't all PC versions, even within Unreal, be as superior?**
Ben Berraondo: I was talking earlier with one of our developer relations people who worked closely with Rocksteady. His main point about this was that Rocksteady have one of the most talented art departments he's ever worked with. In the end, the assets are what's crucially important.

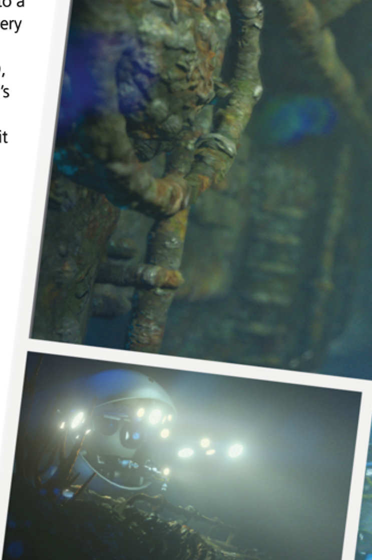
How would you respond to allegations that PhysX is a marketing ploy, and that you're skewing the market with money?
Lars Weinand: It comes down to the tools. Without PhysX, the game would have been exactly the same as on console. The benefit for us is that we want to make sure that games play best on GeForce, and we want people to use the features in our new GPUs. We have more than 200 people working on the developer relations team, making sure Unreal Engine gets anti-aliasing, for instance. What people are seeing is the marketing aspect, but that's just one part of it.
Mike Skolones: We listen to what devs would like to see, we show them our toybox. The *Batman* guys, the *Mafia II* guys, they have complete input into how they want to bring this stuff into their game to make it better. It's very much give and take, and we learn a tremendous amount whenever we talk to these developers.

How about MLAA? Intel has its algorithm, AMD/ATI has another. People are asking where Nvidia's is.
Nick Stam: We know morphological AAs are out there, of course, and there are other techniques. So, yes, we're investigating all of them. We can't tell you anything right now but we are looking into alternative technologies that use the shaders, which might be similar, might be morphological, but we can't say right now.

How much do you think 3D will move to the centre of PC gaming?
BB: It's been a long time since a new technology's come along that's been supported by so many different hardware vendors across industries. Movie studios fully support it, you've got Blu-ray using it, Panasonic and Fujifilm are releasing 3D cameras. Sony say that 40 per cent of their TV line-up next year will be 3D-capable. But let's be honest, games were already in 3D when the first 3D engines came out in the mid-'90s. We had a 3D world within your PC monitor, so from that respect it's much easier to ensure games are displayed in 3D. It's very comforting to see you've got over 450 games that are fully supported in 3D right now, across DX9, 10 and 11. We've seen some amazing feedback from gamers and developers are getting very excited.
LW: 3D is a very natural fit for PC games. We're raising the quality of games so they're getting better and more realistic: we have more triangles, higher resolution textures and shader effects, so the environments look better every time a big title comes out. And it just looks better again in 3D. There's a premium in terms of budget, obviously, but we have a solution for this, a very good one, and it doesn't really have any competition today. It brings the PC even further away from consoles. Consoles have trouble even playing a game at 1080 – we play in 3D at 1080, even going to the extreme of three screens. It's all about the experience, and if you care about it, this is a solution. And there's a lot of movement in 3D – the industry believes in it. That's why people pay the premium over other platforms. It's like buying a BMW over a Lada.

How close is 3D to achieving the same kind of prominence as surround sound?
BB: I think we're a lot closer than people think to that tipping point. I've talked to a variety of game publications who are very keen to test games in 3D now. People who saw *Call Of Duty: Black Ops* in 3D, for instance, who agreed that once 3D's taken away from you again, you really notice the difference. We first noticed it when *Burnout Paradise* came out – it looked so good in 3D that the sense of speed just totally went in 2D, on that flat surface.

Nvidia has previously suggested that 'physics gameplay' will be as important as the advent of 3D graphics. Do you still believe that's the case?
MS: I've thought about this a lot over the years. If you go back to the early days of videogames, physics really was a core element of gameplay already. If you look at racing games, flight simulators, even *Asteroids* – you bust up a rock and the trajectories are somewhat plausible. Then we fast-forward to the era of the 3D revolution in the '90s, an awful lot of games felt like they were played on rails – you'd run around a bunch of square tunnels and monsters would pop out like some animated cartoon. So there's a tension there.



"Consoles have trouble playing a game at 1080 – we play in 3D at 1080, even going to the extreme of three screens. It's all about the experience"

The problem is that it's really expensive and difficult, and requires a lot of processing power to have a rich, interactive physical environment with a well-tuned game inside it. But it's pretty clear looking at the evolution of games that people do want more rich, immersive environments where different things can happen. The challenge is getting the hardware and software there without making the gameplay feel artificial. When you make a very rich interactive environment, you're coupling all the systems together. Physics is the nerve centre of it all, and everything changes dramatically when you simply knock over a wall.

Five years from now, it should be obvious that we've made a lot of progress. And you can't do that without scaling hardware, which is why we believe the GPU – the enabling technology – is the place to scale.


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REPORT

WHAT DOES THE TRULY MODERN ARCADE LOOK LIKE? WE SET OUT ON A TRIP TO THE SEASIDE TO FIND OUT

Arcades are dead, goes the refrain. But it's news to the likes of **Patrick Michael**, who runs R&D at Sega Amusements Europe. "There are still traditional arcades, particularly at holiday destinations," he says. "You've got big holiday parks, seasides, combined family entertainment centres, bowling centres which have arcades attached, cinemas, shopping centres – it's pretty varied. And if you go to places like the Middle East, they have very large dedicated arcades."

Today, we haven't made it as far as the Middle East. We've instead arrived at Weston-Super-Mare, a seaside town in the south west of England whose coin-op-cabinet-festooned Grand Pier was reopened in November following an ambitious rebuild said to have cost in the region of £56m. As the UK's (possibly the world's) newest arcade, where better to take the temperature of the modern coin-op industry?

Over the following pages, in which we get to grips with a selection of cabinets (some produced this year, others having rolled out of factories as early as 2006), a clear picture emerges: today's large-scale arcade is dominated by racing and shooting, and by racing and shooting games designed to offer fewer than five minutes of play for your 50p or £1 coin. The application and determination of old-school arcade gaming ninjas like Billy Mitchell and Steve Wiebe is therefore entirely irrelevant here; this is videogaming more as fairground attraction than it is test of man versus machine.

The modern arcade attempts to make the experience more engaging through its understanding and exploitation of social factors. Nearly all of the cabinets set up on the Grand Pier offer a multiplayer mode, and naturally the buzz of both head-to-head competition and collaborative play proves to be a valuable component in their pursuit of coins.

The arcade industry has been heading in this direction for years, of course, sharpening and honing its act in order to stay alive in an era of dizzyingly sophisticated and diverse home entertainment. But can a bunch of spoilt console and PC gamers still have fun in such an environment? That's what we set out to discover. And, while we're on the arcade topic, on p70 we take a look at the UK game development scene's contribution to the industry in the form of Sega's *Grid*.



RAMBO

(Sega, 2008)

There are no pretensions here in Sega's wilfully trashy lightgun romp. Splicing clips from the films with clumsy, chunky 3D, *Rambo* takes us to the rocky wilds of Afghanistan and to the jungles of Vietnam. It's a little surprising to play a game in 2010 in which you fight *alongside* the Mujahideen, but then Rambo's political nuances have always been lost amid a relentless hail of bullets. And so it is here, with unlimited ammunition, the briefest of reloads and hundreds upon hundreds of Soviets to gun down. You shoot a helicopter with an arrow – true to the films, it explodes instantly. Like many of the games at the Grand Pier, there's little that encourages a second go: the pleasure comes not from the mechanics, but from the ludicrousness of its clumsy spectacle and shoddy transitions between corny film lines and gormless CG. But for that first run, it's pretty damn hilarious.

Rambo

HUMMER

(Sega, 2009)

The idea of General Motors' lumbering, whale-sized automobiles providing fast-paced thrills in the context of a racing game is an unusual one, and the concept simply shouldn't work. But it sort of does. In the hands of a lesser coin-op designer, *Hummer* would probably have proved a disaster, but Sega manages to wring out hard-edged, knockabout fun that has little to do with finesse and everything to do with action. The cabinet's insistence on shaking you around until your fillings come loose has something to do with it, but the hazard-strewn environments and a control system that allows you to use a pedal to adjust the angle of your gas-guzzler in mid-air (in order to perfect your landing) provide plenty of things to keep you occupied as you attempt to shunt your way to the front of a particularly heavyweight pack. It's big, loud and unreconstructed, and thus a perfect modern coin-op.

Hummer

PANIC MUSEUM

(Taito, 2010)

A haunted museum is the scene for Taito's barking mad lightgun game, in which you're as likely to encounter mummies and witches as you are planes, flying books and giant bees. The game revels in non sequiturs, with a mine-cart section culminating in a battle with a speeding sphinx and a showdown with Frankenstein's monster. There are collectibles, power-ups and health pick-ups to nab along the way, and the game keeps things lively, mixing slow enemies which soak up bullets with speedier, more fragile foes. The game propels you through jungles, catacombs and dogfights, while boss creatures betray weakspots and obstacles speed towards you, awaiting to be shattered with bullets. There's no need to reload, which may seem like one interaction too few in a genre not encumbered with complexity – but the game knows its limits, and otherwise embraces the absurdity of the on-rails shooter.

Panic Museum



H2Overdrive

Tank Tank Tank

Terminator Salvation

Deadstorm Pirates

H2OVERDRIVE
(Raw Thrills, 2009)

H2Overdrive – and let us acknowledge that that is a truly great name – is a 'spiritual sequel' to *Hydro Thunder*, inasmuch as it is *Hydro Thunder HD*. A set of faux-hovercraft cockpits with enormous throttle levers is the key difference between the games, and one exploited to the fullest by a rip-roaring racer that bucks you and the onscreen craft about mercilessly. Our fourplayer races make some its nearby competitors feel poor – visually it possesses more than enough grunt to throw lots of effects around, and the combination of its key boosting mechanic with that throttle control is a tactile thrill that hooks you from the off. The great water physics and shallow learning curve prompted further rounds of credits, along with the fact you get a decent length of race for your money – or perhaps the intensity just makes it feel that way. One of the best of the modern coin-op breed to play with friends.

TANK TANK TANK
(Namco, 2009)

Tank Tank Tank has little difficulty standing out among the racers and lightgun games of the modern arcade, and not only because it is neither of those things. Its biggest immediate point of difference is its widescreen monitor presented in portrait mode, giving a narrow but deep view of its action. It feels uncomfortable at first, and the game doesn't do much to take advantage of the extra vertical display space, but it does enough elsewhere to compensate. Taking your photo before a game begins ensures plenty of laugh potential when tracking down an enemy tank over which hangs an image of a gurning friend in a cowboy hat, while the cabinet's force-feedback mechanism, which pushes your seat back when you unleash shells, is a brilliantly effective touch – especially when you're letting loose the meatiest attacks. Teamplay and deathmatch-style modes round out a shallow but enjoyable blaster.

TERMINATOR: SALVATION
(Raw Thrills, 2009)

The one trick *Terminator* brings to the lightgun shooter is the ability to reload by slapping the base of your plastic clip. Otherwise, and despite the Terminator skin, the only way it is exceptional is in its aggressive difficulty. As with the other videogames that have attempted to use the licence, it doesn't find the right balance between presenting a conquerable threat and being true to the films' more formidable conception of nigh-invincible robo-bastards. Terminator was scarier when there was just one, relentlessly pursuing the protagonists through a world that refused to believe them. The armies of shiny cyber-soldiers somehow fail to wield the same sense of menace. Nonetheless, they soak up plenty of shots before falling apart – which means you can't help but take damage in return, and the game doesn't really care to tell you which of the many enemies onscreen is an actual threat.

DEADSTORM PIRATES
(Namco, 2010)

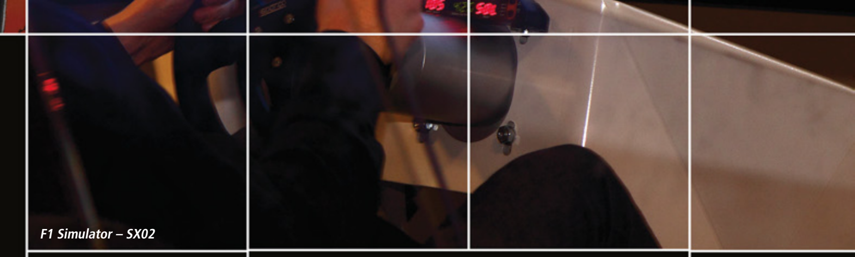
The best of the three games packaged together for PS3 as *Time Crisis: Razing Storm*, *Deadstorm* is an on-rails shooter with a pretty heavy emphasis on co-operative play, whose original arcade incarnation includes a curtained booth with pneumatic seating. Since the players' firepower increases when their reticules overlap, there's a far greater need for coordination than in similar shooters – and an incentive to keep dropping in £2 credits when one player succumbs to the onslaught of skeletal pirates and sea monsters. This at least creates a tension with the traditional need to keep your half of the screen covered. The game otherwise offers pleasantly splashy on-rails nonsense, with lengthy and hokey cutscenes. There's minor novelty in the spasming seats and the QTEs, which make use of the ship's wheel sitting between the players' cannons. Despite this, it's hard to justify the asking price.



Big Buck Hunter Pro

BIG BUCK HUNTER PRO
(Raw Thrills, 2006)

The first in the series to introduce simultaneous competitive play, you and a fellow outdoorsman unleash fury on the fauna of North America. '*Hunter*' is probably something of a misnomer: there is precious little in the way of stalking going on. After selecting one of six soon-to-die critters, players blast their way though six 'treks' to rack up a score – each introduced alongside a saucy picture of a young lady in a pith helmet. You gain extra points for killing bucks outright, while you try to avoid plugging any does. Finally, each hunt has its own bonus rounds – we played the quail shoot, which, given the massive number of birds on offer, feels like a simple matter of pumping the plastic gun more rapidly than your partner. The screen's a little on the small side, but the weapons are solidly constructed and the focus on raucous side-by-side rivalry mostly makes up for its shallow action.


F1 Simulator – SX02

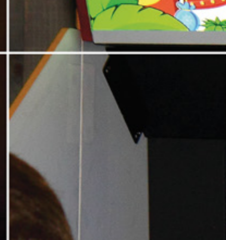
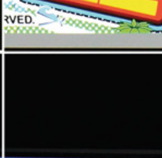
F1 SIMULATOR – SX02
(Simworx, 2010)

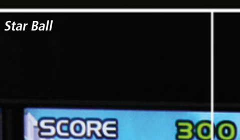
The clarion call of the simulator: the pros use it! As experienced virtual pros, we settle into the cockpit and barely hear the attendant telling us to raise an arm in case of distress. Wise attendant. She had foreseen the first corner, at which our car gracefully vaults the barriers before rolling, while the machinery spasms around us. The arm stayed low, of course. The simulation is exceptional, which means our cornering remains bad – the heavy handling, frightening speed and treacherous depth perception means no Sunday drivers. The full-body experience is the main selling point, and it doesn't mess around: you're tipped left and right, judder over rough ground, jerk sharply when the car does, while your field of vision is three massive screens. It's a little anti-recession at a fiver for five minutes' play, but earns the money while it lasts. And, more importantly, you couldn't have one in your house.

GUITAR HERO ARCADE
(Activision/Konami/Raw Thrills, 2009)

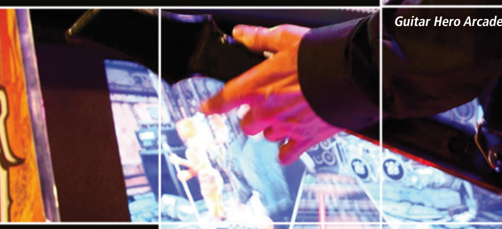
You suspect that *Guitar Hero Arcade* will be underwhelming. And for all the brand's cheap-rock swagger, *GHA* makes you feel it's best left as domestic amusement – the guitar controller, its key selling point, feels a little over-fiddly among the dance mats, bongos and J-pop machines. More than that, it just doesn't have the same show-off factor as something like *DDR*, and the lack of punters at the Grand Pier's four-machine setup suggests self-consciousness is a fine balancing act. We're always game for Hit Me With Your Best Shot, of course, but playing *GHA* is like playing last year's *Guitar Hero*, with the biggest difference being the tonnage of the guitars – they're certainly sturdy, but expect an aching shoulder after a few songs. It all works, but doesn't quite convince. You finish the song, get 94 per cent, and that's another quid. Underwhelming, as suspected, with a bitter twist for an encore.





Star Ball



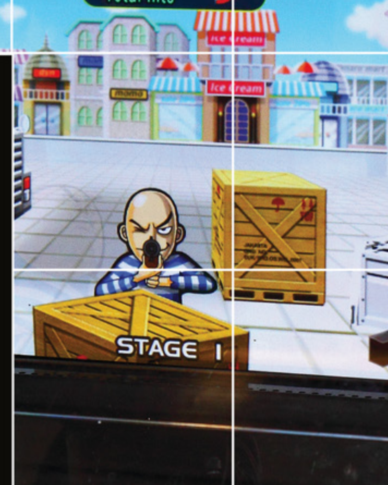




Guitar Hero Arcade

STAR BALL
(Komuse, 2009)

One of the great regrets of adulthood is your permanent estrangement from pits of plastic balls: they are for children. *Star Ball* seems built for such nostalgia, offering up a large, touch-sensitive screen, multiple levels full of targets, and a gutter filled with tons of plastic balls for you to pelt at it. It's great arcade fare, and the surreal levels spice it up even further: one level you're battering midges away from sleeping kids, the next you're assaulting a (yes) flasher on a subway train while trying to avoid the other passengers. Reaching a certain score in each level lets two players continue on the same credit, and the requirements for success are fairly reasonable. It's a clever use of cheap tech, and a charming one. Importantly, it's one of the few ticket-dispensing games here that's based around a videogame (rather than electromechanical) concept, which cements its novelty appeal.





PRIMEVAL HUNT

(Sega, 2008)

Among the worst games available at the Grand Pier is this botched amalgam of free-roam hunting game and lightgun shooting gallery. The reticules have trouble keeping up with the movements of our guns and register our shots with noticeable delay. An awkwardly located touchscreen is used to direct the player's view through a roughly rendered tropical setting and, oddly, fire a bazooka. How freedom of movement would work seems to have been barely considered: players clip through trees and dinosaurs clip through the player – one prehistoric chicken beast continues to peck at us even though only half of its polygons protrude into our vision. The latency on shots, a malfunctioning gun controller and the extremely stingy ammo allowance lead to a premature end to our hunt. Unsurprisingly, the hi-scores table don't reach astronomical figures – clearly, one go proves to be enough for most.

Primeval Hunt

GTi Club Supermini Festa

SPEED RIDER

(Feiloli, 2009)

Once upon a time, arcade machines came from Japan or the US, but as the industry has changed, so too has the geographical makeup of its manufacturers. *Speed Rider* comes from Taiwan, and it's not a machine that will do wonders for the territory's reputation in videogame production. This superbike racing game's big innovation is an infrared sensor positioned on the fuel tank of its imitation two-wheeler; lean forward and it will acknowledge your position with the onscreen rider, the improved aerodynamics providing a speed boost (while simultaneously reducing the bike's steering sharpness). While the game encourages opening up the throttle, though, lining its tracks with some preposterously banked curves, it simply never feels like you're reaching outrageous speeds – not even when you slap the oversized boost button, positioned next to the sensor on the fuel tank.

Speed Rider

GTI CLUB SUPERMINI FESTA

(Konami, 2009)

OK, we're cheating a bit by including the latest iteration of *GTi Club*, because it's not to be found Weston-Super-Mare's Grand Pier but in one of the town's other, more dimly lit, arcades, but it deserves inclusion here because it's the authentic version of what was released, to not much acclaim, as a console game earlier this year on Wii and PSP. The full-scale cabinet's steering wheel makes an obvious difference, but it's the yankable handbrake that really drives home the variance between dedicated hardware and attempts to emulate it via buttons on a joypad. Which isn't to say that *Supermini Festa* is anything approaching awesome in its native colours, however. There are plenty of cars and play modes to choose from, but the physics feel dated, making the game as a whole seem out of time.

THE ROAD TO THE ARCADE

IN BUILDING ON ITS PROUD HERITAGE OF RACING COIN-OPS, SEGA HAS LOOKED AT THE HOME MARKET FOR INSPIRATION, BEGINNING WITH GRID ARCADE

Peter Harrison, producer, Codemasters

Grid Arcade is not just some arcade mode of a game called *Race Driver: Grid*. Not quite, anyway. The kind you get as an on-disc alternative to career mode is typically about simplification, but this, a dedicated Sega cabinet built to command raucous environments, is about amplification. Codemasters' love of attention-grabbing, time-consuming frontends has been tamed, and it takes just a few twirls of the wheel (to browse) and taps on the pedal (to select) to get a multiplayer game under way.

In many ways, this feels like the game *Grid* secretly wanted to be: loud, violent and relentless. Flashbacks are out, obviously, replaced by a 'Recovery' button to reset instantly to track. Thanks to some aggressive AI and the suicidal antics of players in adjacent cabinets, you'll be pressing it a lot. As one of few arcade machines to boast this level of physics simulation, based on hardware in line with a mid-range PC, its races are the kind you see in attract videos but seldom beyond, full of unexpected air time and tumbling bodywork.

It won't appeal to everyone. For a Sega-manufactured unit it sticks doggedly to *Grid*'s more cinematic looks, from the heavy postprocessing to the inherent softness of its DX9 visuals; *Daytona* it is not. Splitting the tracks between territories might seem an odd limitation, too, though Codemasters insists it's an attention issue, and that too much choice is unfavourable in a coin-op racer. Still, operators can switch between track sets if necessary, the options including Long Beach, Milan, Nurburgring and San Francisco. With a 32-inch HD display, the cabinet can join five others for local sixplayer races.

We talk to **Peter Harrison** (producer, Codemasters) and **Patrick Michael** (head of R&D, Sega Amusements Europe) about the game's development, and the wider arcade scene as we move into 2011.

How important was it to mechanically differentiate *Grid* from the home versions? The AI feels more aggressive.

Peter Harrison: As far as the hardware goes, obviously there were challenges there, and in terms of the game dynamics, we're looking at a much broader range of potential players than maybe our console game would touch. So you're right in saying we had to make changes, some fundamental game design changes. Obviously we took out the Flashback system and put in the reset instead. Flashback acts as a counterpoint to the track and car balance in *Grid* – so if you play the console game, you'll notice there are lots of hazards at the side of the track. Or, on some of the race tracks, you've got things such as gravel and grass that are quite low grip. So there's a risk/reward thing going on there, but with the Flashback system you can just rewind and try again.

But it does interrupt the race flow a bit, and it certainly doesn't work with multiplayer. So fairly early on, even before





Patrick Michael, head of R&D, Sega Amusements Europe





we started prototyping, we decided we weren't going to go with that. So we had to make the cars a little less likely to spin when you do something wrong. And we had to take out some of the hazards that kind of protrude into the track. And we had to add a reset [to track] button.

But what that gave us was a game where you don't have this long learning curve where you're learning to drive well and how to get round the track without incident. You can quickly get in and focus on beating your friends, setting lap records and beating the AI. That was probably the key process for us: getting from people who are putting down £30-40 on a product, to people putting a pound in a machine and expecting an experience that makes them feel good.

Were things like stat-tracking and persistent saves ever considered?
Patrick Michael: It's something that I'd love to do. I would certainly like to see Europe become more interested in networked games. Obviously, networked titles are more popular in Japan. It's been very difficult to bring that to the European market, and there are lots of reasons for that. There are recurring costs for the operator, whether it's for broadband or some subscription service. What usually happens is that any kind of save is IC Card-based, or PIN-based using a keypad. I'd really love to see online, I'd love to see leaderboards linked across platforms, and I'd love to see games played across platforms as well. It's a difficult subject to bring up with operators.

And presumably DLC is completely off the table?
PM: Well, that's the biggest problem: when we physically sell a machine we have no idea where it's gone or where it's going to go. In five years' time it may be in Istanbul or an arcade in Delhi – we have no idea. If we were to offer a software upgrade, would the operator even realise it's there? Would they have the ability to download it or burn it? So we don't have the beauty of patching software after we ship; it really has to be right first time.
PH: Since we released *Grid* on the home platforms, we've obviously done *Dirt 2* and we're working on *Dirt 3*, and our designers are really piling in the online features. If we had the opportunity to even add in leaderboards to arcade titles, we'd have loads of ideas. It's just a case of waiting for the infrastructure to catch up.

How much is this collaboration the shape of things to come for European arcades?
PM: We're certainly interested in doing more titles in this way, and I'd certainly be up for talking to any developer who feels they have a product that might suit the arcade market. It's an opportunity to extend a brand outside your traditional market and put your game in front of a whole new audience. And hopefully it's financially rewarding as well.

"I'D CERTAINLY BE UP FOR TALKING TO ANY DEVELOPER WHO FEELS THEY HAVE A PRODUCT THAT MIGHT SUIT THE ARCADE MARKET"

Are you going to start throttling back original titles for the arcade?
PM: I don't think that would be the case. With *Sega Rally 3*, although it could be described as a conversion, it was developed in parallel with the home product, and I'd certainly like to commission some new titles from scratch. We've got some concepts we're working on at the moment for some very different arcade games.

And is that going to cover quite a broad spread of genres?
PM: We're tarred with the driving and shooting… and I think that's the nature of the beast. Again, a lot of operators are understandably nervous about straying outside the traditional genres, but we're certainly trying to innovate. And Sega always has on that front, not always successfully. *2Spicy* was the first versus shooting game, and I loved it but unfortunately it committed the cardinal sin of requiring a tutorial. As soon as you require a tutorial, the player will skip it and won't know how to play the game, and will have a disappointing experience. I still think there's a lot we can offer in the arcade that potentially won't be available in the home for many years yet.

Is 3D simply incompatible with arcades at the moment? It's obviously paying dividends in cinemas.
PM: It's certainly found its way into the Japanese market already. Konami have launched both *Metal Gear Arcade* and a title called *Road Fighters*, which is also in 3D. They've chosen the LCD shutter approach. Now, they've integrated that into the cabinets, so it's a pull-down visor that goes in front of the player. That's fine for the Japanese market, but it'd probably survive two days in a European arcade. We've been looking at the parallax-lens prismatic lenses, and it's something I started looking at about five years ago.

The biggest problem is the sweet spot – that the player needs to physically be in the right space to fully appreciate the effect. And you kind of alienate spectators, because someone on the other side of the arcade will see a blurry mess. It's a really difficult balance. There are solutions – it's something Sega and other manufacturers are looking at. Given the right cabinet, you can do 3D really well.

There have been spectator-screen cabinets in the past…
PM: Yeah. And on *Road Fighters* they've extended the seat up and put an additional pair of glasses into the back of the seat, so someone can bend down and peer through. I think with 3DS around the corner, it's really going to force 3D into the mainstream. Sky are pushing 3D very hard now as well in the UK. It's coming up with a workable solution for a pretty hostile environment that's the biggest problem.

How about glasses-free 3D?
PM: The tech used in 3DS is available – you can go out and buy one of those screens now. But again it's the case of being sat in the right place. For a driving title, it's not so bad in the sense that, within a certain margin, you can put a player in that place. You've got movement of the seat back and forwards and some variation in height, but you can still achieve it. But then it's how you present that to the onlooker. Do you put a big second screen above in 2D?

Are you offering a hydraulic version of *Grid*?
PM: No, not at present. We did that with *Sega Rally 3* and it was a fairly long additional development process. And I think, given the current economic climate, it's important to keep the cabinet costs down for the operator. The average operator for an arcade machine, in an ideal world, would like payback in 20 weeks on their initial investment. And that's certainly achievable with a big title.



Jonathan Blow & Chris Hecker

Braid was a keystone in the digital indie revolution, while SpyParty may prove its most intriguing new addition. We sit down with the authors of both games to discuss the highs and lows of independence

Five years ago, the independent gaming scene as we know it today didn't exist. Accessible only via a network of aggregation websites and specialist forums, with the odd morsel picked up for low-key mainstream distribution, it was essentially a hermetically sealed community, not far removed from the demo scene of the late '80s. Then came Steam, console digital distribution services, social networking and smartphone app stores – a previously unimaginable distribution and communications network. Suddenly, small-scale development studios were given access to a global gaming audience. The floodgates had been opened.

The standard bearer for the digital distribution era was *Braid*, a time-shifting 2D platformer more concerned with abstract reasoning and the nature of causality than double-jumps and Easter eggs. Its author, **Jonathan Blow**, is now working on a similarly idiosyncratic 3D adventure game named *The Witness*. Meanwhile, veteran coder **Chris Hecker** – a one-time member of Will Wright's *Spore* team – has become an opinionated mouthpiece for the indie community. His new project *SpyParty* sets out to explore hardcore gaming skills within an espionage context that revolves around people-watching.

Where do these two titans of indie development see the sector going, and what is it that's still holding it back? We sit down with both of them to find out.

A lot of people are referring to this as a golden age for indie development. Would you agree?
Chris Hecker: Well, I hope it's still a golden age! It certainly was when the likes of *Braid* and *Castle Crashers* shipped. The business end of things is clearly huge – the fact that we have XBL, PSN, Steam, Facebook, yada, yada. But also, hardware is fast and cheap – *SpyParty* just throws polygons at the screen and doesn't care; I couldn't have made that game ten years ago, because you had to sweat over every poly. I mean, 30 animated characters? On a laptop? Come on!
Jonathan Blow: There are definitely creative games happening, but they're a minority of what gets done. That's not a bad thing – you never expect the majority to be awesome. But, yes, it does still feel like we're in a boom time.

> "SpyParty just throws polygons at the screen; I couldn't have made that game ten years ago, because you had to sweat over every poly"

What about the financial side of things?
CH: People who do awesome stuff don't usually do it for money reasons, but at least indie game development is now financially viable. There's a difference between thinking 'I'm going to get rich' and 'I'm going to be able to eat'. It's great that you can produce games like *SpyParty* or *The Witness*, which are experimental and weird and kind of pushing in different directions, and then actually have a prayer of paying your mortgage. In fact, it's more than a prayer: if you develop a quality product you will probably be able to sell it now.
JB: Yeah, even if you just sell it on the PC, even if Steam won't take it, you can still shift copies if you do a decent job of getting the word out, and it's a good enough game.
CH: And you keep your expenses down.
JB: Look at the Humble Indie Bundle guys – they've made almost $200,000 per game, plus a bunch of money for charity. That was not backed by anybody, that was them putting up a webpage, and saying: 'Hey, we've got this idea'.
CH: And being able to have virtual money, with Paypal and micropayments – it's an interesting time. What Jon and I talk about a lot, though, is, now that we're working on big projects, will it be a golden age by the time we're done?
JB: There are reasons to believe that it won't be.
CH: Right. I mean, you can't ignore things like a console transition, which is terrifying. If that happens, what does it mean for XBLA and PSN?



Jonathan Blow (left) and Chris Hecker have a long history of promoting independent development, including a close involvement in the hugely influential Indie Game Jam





Hecker previously worked on *Spore* (top) – a project that encouraged his move into indie gaming. Blow's *Braid* (above), meanwhile, was originally an XBLA hit in 2008

XBLA goes through these cycles – in the year *Braid* shipped there were some huge games.
JB: That was through their summer promotion, and it lasted all the way through to the next one, when *Trials HD* and *Shadow Complex* came out. That was a big time of optimism. But if you look at the majority of games released on XBLA recently, most of them tank, they lose money. Why is that? Is it the quality of the games? Has the market changed? Is it that there was novelty to Live Arcade at first? It's unclear. I'm not going to attempt to predict what will happen. The way I'm doing it is, I've not signed any business deals for *The Witness*. I'd like to have funding for it, but in two years' time, I don't know what the business climate is going to be like, so I'm not going to commit to something now. I need to stay agile. Also, I don't want anyone telling me what to do.
CH: People are constantly telling me I'm insane to spend two or three years on this game. Some friends who are successful businessmen are like, "Ship now and iterate!" It's the Facebook model – do something smaller and get it done. And with a console transition coming, people say: "You'll be totally screwed if you're caught in the middle of that!" But it's like the weather – it's a fool's errand to try and predict it. I don't know when the console transition is coming. I mean, if they're not telling John Carmack and Tim Sweeney, they're not going to tell me! If you start sweating the logistics of it, you can dive under a mountain of that stuff and still get screwed up. I'm just going to try to make the best possible game, a game that's so awesome that Xbox and PSN are begging me for it!
JB: And, by the way, *Minecraft* has made a crapload of money – you don't need to be on a console.
CH: You've just got to do your thing. You can't sweat the business stuff – it's a variable you can't control. The variable within your control is the quality of the game, so focus on that.

Do you think people have simply become more amenable to indie games, or have indie games created their own market?
CH: It's give and take. I would argue against the idea that games have become more interesting. I don't think we're pushing anywhere near hard enough – I'm a very harsh critic of our industry. That said, there are all these statistics. They ask kids in high school, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And now they all say "game developer" instead of "rock star".

So now you get people like Cactus doing games and it's like, what are you doing? It makes no sense, but that's great. I mean, we talk about kids like this all the time – these guys make so many games! They're so productive. We wish they would go deeper on some of them, but it's great there are guys out there doing 40 games before they're 20 – we didn't do shit before we were 20. It was really hard back then!

There are a lot of people comparing the indie scene now to Hollywood in the '70s, but are you saying it's more like the garage band scene in the '60s?
CH: I studied film history, and what I'd say is, the movie business in the '70s was so far ahead of where games are now. Where we are is more like flailing around in 1905. We're still recording that dude sneezing and thinking it's really cool – we haven't figured out we can move the camera yet! But, sure, the garage band mentality amongst today's indies is awesome: "Fuck The Man – I'm going to do what I want!" There's a kind of punk theory going on in the industry right now. Frank Lantz, the head of the NYU Game Center, talks about this all the time. We've got developers like Mark Essen, the guy who did *Flywrench* and is doing *Nidhogg* now – they show their games in art galleries, and they're brash and loud. It's a cool movement. There's a comparison to be made with music here. Big bands like Led Zeppelin or The Beatles took their craft farther and deeper. You can throw together a song and bash it out and if you're naturally talented there'll be something cool there – but you've got to develop your craft, and a lot of these kids they just don't take it anywhere – they throw together a game in a weekend, then go on to the next thing.

But punk changed music because it made the bigger, more mainstream groups change as well.
CH: Music is great at churning new ideas up, and what's happening now is that games are getting a little bit better at that. In the indie development scene there's a lot of mulch – that's the term I use for all these games that never get taken all the way. Some of these games are never going to be trees, but mulch them and the ideas go into other games. [To Blow] Do you like that analogy?
JB: It's going to look really bad in print!

Do you think platform holders are doing enough to encourage indie development?
JB: It depends on what you mean. Microsoft has provided the lowest barrier to entry with Xbox Live Indie Games, but most of them are not very good – I don't think that's a controversial statement. So if you're thinking about the impact of indie games on the whole forum of games then probably Sony has done more because of the way they curate the games they put on there – they're actually looking for games that are artful or experimental. I mean, they published Linger In Shadows; Microsoft would never have done that – that's not even really a game. XBLA is more conservative than PSN but it still has a larger audience so it's much more commercially feasible, as long as you can get your game noticed – which is getting harder over time, but is still possible. Each of those elements contributes. [To Hecker] So, are they doing enough?
CH: The answer can never be yes!
JB: But it can, though! It's actually the responsibility of indies to step up. Some of the stuff that Microsoft signs and publishes on XBLA is pretty bad; some of it is very good. *Super Meat Boy* is obviously a really good game. I wish they had promoted that more heavily, but Live Arcade is part of a bureaucratic machine, which is part of a bigger bureaucratic machine and so on – and what more can they do?
CH: Oh, come on, each of us could come up with ten ways they could make it better, without even pausing to breathe!
JB: If the parameters are that you can totally dissolve and reconfigure the games division of Microsoft at will to make what you want happen, then sure, there's tons we could change.
CH: The point is, they could do more – even though it's great they're just there. I mean, please, God, don't shut down XBLA! But there's that word 'curation' – that's a really important part of this, knowing what you're curating for. They hire people to do portfolio management – there are always ways to improve that sort of thing. There's that William Goldman quote: "Nobody knows anything" – that's totally true in games. You have no idea what's going to be a hit, what's going to move people, but you want a balanced portfolio, with experimental stuff, you want to help developers. And, yes, there's a huge amount of responsibility on the developer to do awesome stuff, that's totally clear.
JB: What I was trying to say, though, is, if every indie game was notable in some way, either really playable or very artistic, then Microsoft and Sony would have a much easier time of dealing with them because they would have a stronger notion of what an indie game was.

"The William Goldman quote – 'Nobody knows anything' – that's totally true in games. You have no idea what's going to be a hit"



School of indie

Hecker discusses the state of gaming education in the US

"I think universities do better now, but it's nowhere near where it could be. There are two branches of videogame education that have sprung up over the last five years. There's the Digipen, vocational craft-based approach, and that seems to produce people who can get a job in a videogame company. Then you get things like the CMU ETC group or Georgia Tech Group or USC – these are more like bachelor of arts degrees, they're sort of lit-crit, and those sometimes produce good game designers. Jenova Chen came out of one of those programmes, Kyle Gabler game out of CMU, and then Chaim Gingold who did Spore creature editor stuff, he came out of Georgia Tech. I've often wondered, did those programmes make those guys or did those guys make those programmes? Because they kind of put them on the map – these famous kids have come out of there and done awesome stuff.

"Schools are really bad at making good programmers – it just doesn't happen. Being a good programmer expands the envelope of the games you can make. To make a game like *SpyParty* or *The Witness* you have to be able to program competently or you just can't get it done – you can't make the pieces work.

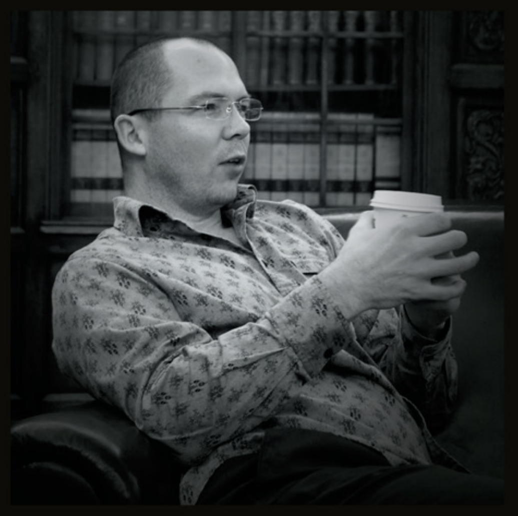
"I think the skill is in becoming a mix of programmer and designer, which is kind of an old-school opinion. You get success stories like *Narbacular Drop* becoming *Portal* – that's great, right? But there's a long way to go before these places are as good as film schools, when a person comes out and is competent to work.

"At least there is more of a focus on actually making games now, which is good. On the USC course, they emphasise making a complete project, and a lot of the courses now take a cross-disciplinary approach – you have to get people from the art school, or whatever, and get a whole game done during the year. That's good – the baseline should be 'make things'. But I think education in general has a long way to go before it's as optimal as it could be."

But a lot of indie games are just low-budget versions of mainstream games, and when you're working for one of these companies, you see a lot of games, you don't even necessarily distinguish, or understand why this game is arty or this game isn't. That's why I'm saying there's an indie side to it, too. I don't consider myself part of the indie community because I'm sort of a loner, but I'll put myself in that group for now: if we actually produced things that were all indie, and not just mainstream on a budget, then it would be easier, I think.
CH: I would hate to be a portfolio manager for one of these services – just the stuff you'd have to choose from. It's not an embarrassment of riches.
JB: Me and some other developers started the Indie Fund this year and we've received over 200 submissions, and so I have at least some idea of what the XBLA submission queue looks like – a lot of it is quite grim. We're actually funding three games. But that's three out of 200…
CH: Even the triple-A indie games could try a lot harder.
JB: People treat *Braid* as if it's some weird, highly experimental project, but in many ways it's a very conventional game. It did some wacky things and presented itself very differently, but the core of the game is a puzzle-solving platformer mechanic that is very well understood – put any gamer in front of that and they know what they're doing. It's not like a Cactus or a Messhof game. The way that I chose to do things in that game were different in a more subtle, detail-orientated way – but there are really good games out there that are a thousand times further away from the mainstream than *Braid*.
CH: Games have a higher bar than music or films – games have to compile and execute, they have to run as a piece of computer software. Just getting a piece of computer software done is really hard. So, yeah, defining how to explore the furthest corner of game design… it's just so hard. It's hard enough to get the mainstream ones to run!

And that's the point here, perhaps. It's been said that games don't do enough to explore human relationships, but could it be that the sorts of indie coders who *can* get games to work aren't the people who *can* explore human nature?
JB: It depends on who you are. John Carmack, who is the best programmer in the games industry, if not the world, totally has no interest in that idea.
CH: He hates our games! He thinks that games are not art, they are merely entertainment – he has no interest in that stuff. We both know John very well and he rarely expresses emotion about anything – he's so balanced, he's like a machine. But he gets mad about the notion of games as art – he goes out of his way to piss on the whole notion! There's this theory that the games industry needs more arty people; that it's us Asperger's freaks, not games themselves, that can't talk about the human condition. So if we get more beret-wearing, chain-smoking hipster types, they'll make the good games. I don't think that's true, because interactivity is a different thing: you can bullshit a poem or even a song, you can put utter garbage on a page and call it a story, but you can't bullshit interactivity. The system has to work, it has to compile. That's what's depressing about these linear theme-park-ride games like *Uncharted* – they almost stop having to work because they're just action sequence, cutscene, action sequence, cutscene – there's no system that actually even has to operate. I have no idea how to make an *Uncharted*, it's just an infinite production problem – but there's no system there that has to work.

But those games sell well, right?
JB: Here's the thing: if games are going to expand, you have to not put yourself in prison by catering to a small audience.
CH: But define a small audience. I mean, three million people is small compared to the population of the world but if I sell three million copies of *SpyParty* that would be awesome! I'd be so happy, I'd fund every other indie game out there. But it is small compared to something like the number of people who go see movies or read books or listen to music – *that* is a large audience. So in games, you have the three million hardcore players, then you have the 20 million pseudo-hardcore gamers who'll buy what one of the three million recommends – you know, when the latest *Grand Theft Western* title comes out, they'll buy it. Then it stops. It stops at 20 million. The best-selling non-



The art of communication

Blow on why there's more to games than systems

"At the moment, there's a mechanics view of game design and that's the lens most people look at things through. They're like: "Ooh, I wanna do a platformer where you can double-jump and on the second jump you're invincible," or something. But that's just the start. The beginning of *Braid*'s development process was all about getting the game mechanic part figured out, and once that was done, most of the work was about communication – I had in my head what an amazing experience this could be, but the actual mechanic would not connect all the way to the players. Some players got that experience, but most of them needed me to do more to bring the experience to them. So in order to be an effective communicator, I needed to spend a couple more years on the game to make it a more effective conduit of this experience that's in my head. When something goes wrong in a game design, that's often a bit of noise that disrupts what you're trying to say. I don't mean 'say' in a narrative sense, I mean the flow of gameplay ideas. Polishing is a communication skill and a lot of indies don't think about that. *The Witness* is mostly about communication."



The Witness **(above), due out on 360 and PS3 next year, is described by creator Blow as "an exploration-puzzle game on an uninhabited island." He's become frustrated with comparisons to both *Myst* and Lost, saying: "The point is the magic that happens in the player's mind when he understands the subtle things"**

bundled SKU ever is *Wii Play*, and it was 23 million copies. That's it. Boom. That's as many as you can sell.
JB: But that took one billion dollars! [Hecker laughs] Seriously. I could use a billion dollars…
CH: But that's a failed movie! If only 20 million people saw your movie, you bombed out. The orders of magnitude are just completely different. I did this research for a talk I gave last year: when Gone With The Wind came out in the UK, they sold something like 37 million tickets. The population in the UK at that time was 37 million. Some people obviously went to see it more than once, but no game comes close to that level of societal penetration. And that's what I'm talking about. Because the games industry is so risk-averse, it tries to sell the same 20 million copies every time. You have to leave that behind at some point.

Do you look at any mainstream game developers and think that they're doing something interesting?
CH: Sure, you can find interesting stuff in almost any game. So, for example, one of the things I'm totally going to steal for *SpyParty* is active reload from *Gears Of War*. One of the problems with *SpyParty*, if you want to go to an e-sports level of skill, which I do, is that if the sniper is looking at the spy, you can't pull off any of the missions, because the animation is just too obvious. I want to make a little player skill interaction that you can opt in to so you can complete an objective with no animation tell – you can do the mission right in front of them. The implementation will be a complete ripoff of active reload; I mean, Epic stole it from a couple of other people, and golf sim UI is similar, but that's a beautiful mechanic.



Hecker's multiplayer *SpyParty* is an espionage game all about 'human behavior, performance, perception, and deception'. It'll be released only when it's "perfect," according to the author

“The best-selling non-bundled SKU ever is Wii Play, and it was 23 million copies. That's it. Boom. That's as many games as you can sell”

I've been studying videos of it very closely and the gauge slows down as it approaches the correct area, which mucks up your timing.

But, look, I think *Gears Of War* is a pretty bad game. I think console shooters are kind of flawed in the first place, but *Gears* feels lumbering. The cover mechanic's fine, but… whatever, it's killing space aliens. But active reload is great, and we could talk about almost any game and find something like that in it. Take *Ico*. I don't know if you consider that a mainstream game, but the hand-holding is one of the most amazing mechanics in the history of games. That puts humanity into the gameplay as a mechanic, rather than every other game that tries to speak to the human condition in the cutscenes. Who gives a shit about that? *Ico* makes it feels like you're connecting to another person. It's embedded in a pretty generic puzzle platformer, but that piece is magic. I don't know why people don't push in that direction more.

But creating moments of absolute gameplay polish – that's a factor missing from indie games isn't it?
JB: With *Braid*, I had that game done, mechanically, in 2006: within eight months of starting development, you could play the whole thing. But the game come out over two years after that. I was just polishing it, making it look better, making it play better – even in the final game there are plenty of things I would have made better if I'd have had the time and money. I believe that was a significant factor in the game's success – that I was willing to just sit there and work on it. After eight months I had the sort of thing you might find on TIGsource or indiegames.com, where people say: "Oh, cool, I have a game now, I'll release it." Well, if you want a game that's going to be successful, that is just the beginning. There are all these influences from film, story, characters, but what you'll hear in school a lot of the time is game mechanics. All the students are talking about game mechanics now.
CH: [Laughs] You kids, get off my lawn!
JB: I have an essay in my backlog of things to do that's about how nobody who uses the phrase game mechanics these days actually understands what game mechanics are. But that's a totally different rant.
CH: Are you keeping a list of all the people we've insulted so far?
JB: I'm not insulting the students, I'm insulting the teachers.

So we need to stop fixating on mechanics and start thinking about fully rounded, polished indie games?
CH: It's part of the job, it's part of the art and the craft, it's not the optional thing you do when you have the luxury of a budget – the thing you're doing is not done until it's polished. It's the difference between a sketch and a painting.
JB: If we look to movies again, I'm sure a lot of directors can watch dailies of some film and be really interested in that, but you're not going to sell dailies to an audience. We're back to what we were saying before – that making games is hard in the first place, and often by the time that you've managed that, you just want to be done with it.
CH: A huge part of being creative is the ability to look at your work with a fresh eye. You're in your room and you've played your game a million times – well, you need to be able to play it a million-and-one times, and to find that thing you never noticed before, and fix it. You can't just have an endless stream of people coming in and pointing things out. You just need to be able to look at your game menu and say, "Oh, that's totally in the wrong order," and you need to fix it. And one of the great things about being indie is you can just stop, exit the game, change it and recompile.
JB: You don't need to have a meeting!



THE **EDGE** AWARDS 2010

The creative, innovative and sometimes inspired from a year that redefined the art of games

It's been a year of numbers. Eighty-three million – *FarmVille*'s peak number of average monthly players, recorded in March. $104.5 million – the amount of investment that went into making *APB*, which ran for less than three months before it closed. Twelve – the position *Metroid: Other M* charted in its first week on sale in the UK. Five – the number of years between *Gran Turismo 5*'s first airing and its release. Two-and-a-half million – the number of Kinect sensors Microsoft sold worldwide in its first month on sale. And 2.3 million – the number of downloads made of the most popular ever torrent, which consists of *StarCraft II*, equalling 15.77 petabytes of data.

These numbers are emblematic of an industry in flux. The old IP stalwarts don't necessarily cut it any more. Piracy is rife. Risk is high. Making games is hard. But even as the global economic situation remained stalled, it still offered huge opportunities for success, allowing gaming to reach unprecedented numbers of people. And success hasn't just come for the money men. Three more numbers – **Edge** 10s, to be precise – proved that in the midst of it all, this industry also managed to produce stellar slices of interactive entertainment for the rest of us.


POLICE
XBOX 360
KINECT

THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BESTGAME(MAINSTREAM)



Super Mario Galaxy 2

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

When we awarded *Mario Galaxy* our best game award in 2008 we wondered just where Mario could go next. We never guessed that he'd go straight back into space, and we would never have hoped that trying the same tricks with gravity and perspective would transcend even his former achievements. *Super Mario Galaxy 2* nips and tucks its predecessor's triumphs into tuned and taut snippets of interactive euphoria. Its levels never play the same trick twice, each mapping an idea out as a three-dimensional structure which you'll pinwheel on, over, in and through for five minutes before you claim its star and move on to the next. But while it thrusts you into a storm of constant change, it's not bowing to any myth of crumbling attention spans. *Galaxy 2* is product of a surfeit of imagination and a will to test and delight that sits at the very peak of videogame artistry.

Rock Band 3 — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**



The long-heralded bridge between music game and genuine musicianship has arrived. The true hybrid guitar controller will have to wait until next year, but the launch model has already dissolved the fearsome strangeness the fretboard presents to the music illiterate. Yet this sophistication never comes at the cost of the joyously raucous game we love. Accompanied by a tracklist as choice as any before and packaged into the slickest structure yet, this is rhythm-action cranked to full blast.

Bayonetta — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**



Replayability is often repetition: collect logs, pocket treasures. But *Bayonetta* is anchored more deeply. On the surface it's all system and feedback, sound cues smuggled into a riotous soundtrack, rose petals scattering as blood hits air. Underneath, *Bayonetta* gracefully slides between difficulties, establishing a rhythm before changing all the rules – combat becomes almost expressive as your playtime increases. Panache, scale, and a system that rewards mastery with endless surprises: that's replayability.

THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BESTGAME(INDIE)

Minecraft

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **MOJANG SPECIFICATIONS** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Even while its creator, Notch, is adding new features by the month, to a large extent *Minecraft* already feels complete. It's all down to simplicity: of a central conceit which asks you to survive in a world haunted by darkness-loving beasts, and then make sense of survival. And of a world that behaves in elementary ways which combine into a complexity that can support players' imaginations. Whether building the Enterprise or a 16bit logic circuit, travelling through its vast, randomly generated world or exploring its deep caverns while looking for rare minerals, *Minecraft* simply provides a platform. It's remarkable that interaction so analogue could come of a world so digital. Remarkable, too, that *Minecraft* has seen such success, with over two million registered players and over 600,000 sales, making its creator a studio head as fast has he could find the space and staff.

Super Meat Boy — RUNNER-UP

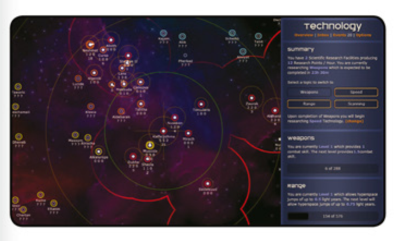
FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **TEAM MEAT**



This purebred platformer lost little in its transition from Flash game to XBLA darling, and added a lot besides. Its super-tight controls, which despite only comprising left, right, jump and run, spur you into traversing lethally contorted levels in graceful speedruns. At every opportunity the rest of the game celebrates its heritage, whether with cutscenes that are ripped from classics, playable characters taken from fellow indie games or secret levels formed from homages to aged consoles.

Neptune's Pride — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **IRON HELMET GAMES** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Say "multiplayer space-based RTS" and you may think of elaborate simulations and reams of statistics. *Neptune's Pride*, meanwhile, pares back the unwieldiness of empire building, instead using its spartan mechanics as a springboard for complexity of a more organic, nefarious kind. It's either the ultimate office game or an exercise in social devastation: the glacial pace ensures that colleagues will conspire by the water-cooler, while its sadistic machinations fuel real-world fallouts worthy of HR warnings.



THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST VISUAL DESIGN

Red Dead Redemption

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Rockstar conjures the spirit of the Old West from a collage of picture-postcard landscapes so attentively drawn that the collision of prairie and bayou never feels awkward, that the naturalism convinces even when every outcrop offers a view of improbable desolate beauty. Part of its majesty comes down to the grunt of its tech; the view from Nekoti Rock or Torquemada would hardly be as grand without *RDR*'s extravagant draw distances. But it's a matter of craft, too – of framing these vistas, of capturing them in just the right light. *RDR* cooks the books so that you nearly always see landscapes at their best – rippling grasses splashed in the thick sallow light of a dipping sun, or scrubland frozen in a flash of lightning. To coordinate the aesthetics of so large an expanse with such care is a staggering act of orchestration – even for a developer so accustomed to triumph.

Bayonetta — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SEGA** DEVELOPER: **PLATINUM GAMES**

Bayonetta's strutting, slinking form might send prudes into spluttering indignation, but she, like all of the game in which she stars, is breathlessly high camp – emphasis on high. Gilded and baroque, grotesque and Gothic, the game confidently matches holy art against corrupted flesh with wry humour and consistent imagination. It may be built on a visual language established by its Japanese forerunners, but *Bayonetta* still cuts one of the most distinctive appearances of any recent release.



Limbo — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **PLAYDEAD** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

In a medium that was anxious to leave monochrome behind as soon as it could display colour, *Limbo* exists as a rarity. But its shaded palette is richer than that of most games, as are its 2D levels' sense of depth and their still and dread-saturated atmosphere. But it's *Limbo*'s animation, from the dogged run and drained slump of its boy protagonist to the scurrying horror of his implacable spider nemesis, that brings this grey world to captivatingly eerie life.



THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR

BEST AUDIO DESIGN

Red Dead Redemption

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

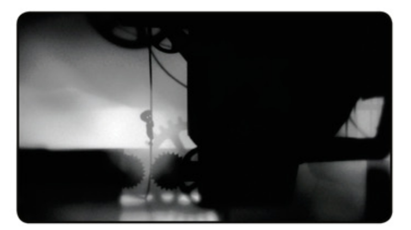


When cougars can easily leap from the undergrowth to maul your horse, an appreciative ear for the natural world is useful. But Rockstar's soundscapes are much more than functional, creating space to evoke the enormity of this barren, beautiful world. The rustle of wind across the scrub or the call of circling birds underline that fundamental trope of westerns: the isolation of man against the backdrop of nature. The score's sparse twangs tip their hat to the hooks of Ennio Morricone, but are so stripped back as to emphasise that which lies between their interjections. The rare deployments of licensed music mark moments of drama, exploiting their obvious anachronism and contrasting with the ambiance. They are deftly selected tracks – but more obviously in *RDR* than any other Rockstar game, it is in the preference for silence that it shows the developer's mastery.

Limbo — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT:360 PUBLISHER: **PLAYDEAD** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Limbo's pared-down audio design is an extension of its expressionist looks – the hiss of static in the background being the natural partner to that flickering, silent-movie-style filter. Not that *Limbo*'s ever silent: whether it's the unusual prominence of sound effects like a crow cawing or wind blowing (all recorded on vintage audio equipment to create a distorted effect), or the unnerving, drawn-out notes of its soundtrack, the game's audioscape is an atmospheric equal to its landscape.



Sid Meier's Civilization V — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES** DEVELOPER: **FIRAXIS**

Close your eyes and you hear the rattle of masts in a harbour, the rumble of construction, the clanking of metal – for the amount of information *Civ V* supplies sonically, it is a miracle that its ambience never becomes a cacophony. But this achievement is trumped by the score itself, which playfully reworks culturally appropriate instrumentation into recognisable mood cues for a modern musical idiom – epitomising the series' ambition as an all-encompassing interactive trip through time.

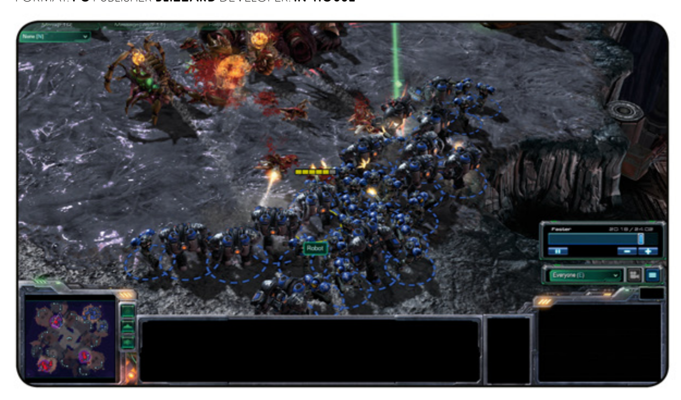




THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST ONLINE EXPERIENCE

StarCraft II: Wings Of Liberty

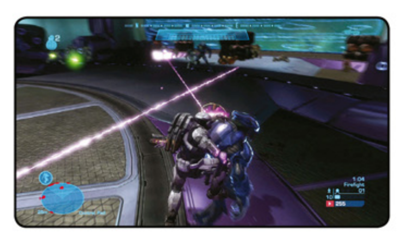
FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER **BLIZZARD** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**



Perhaps it's Battle.net, which has matched for us several hundred games and kept our win/loss rate at almost exactly 50/50. Perhaps it's the mini-leagues, which bracket your progress and make achievement in this hyper-clicking universe comprehensible and fulfilling. It's definitely something to do with the ease of saving and sending replays, and browsing the latest tournament results. Any old competitive game would benefit from this, but *StarCraft II* isn't just any old competitive game. Prime among its online achievements is bridging the gap between day-tripper and hardcore appeal, cushioning the player into its ultra-competitive world and never allowing a mismatch. Like us, you will soon have hotkeys hardwired in your brain and proudly boast a GOM TV subscription. *StarCraft II* shows how a service can be designed to fit its audience.

Halo: Reach — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE**



In essence, its predecessors shaped the online console gaming landscape, so it's only natural that Bungie's last *Halo* should present little less than the most robust multiplayer experience on console today. *Reach*'s every element is fused with an online dimension, whether providing social interplay through co-op romps in Firefight, creative callisthenics through a session in the far-expanded Forge, or intense competition through Team Slayer, each boasting a poised ease born of six years of experience.

Need For Speed Hot Pursuit — RUNNER-UP

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **CRITERION GAMES**



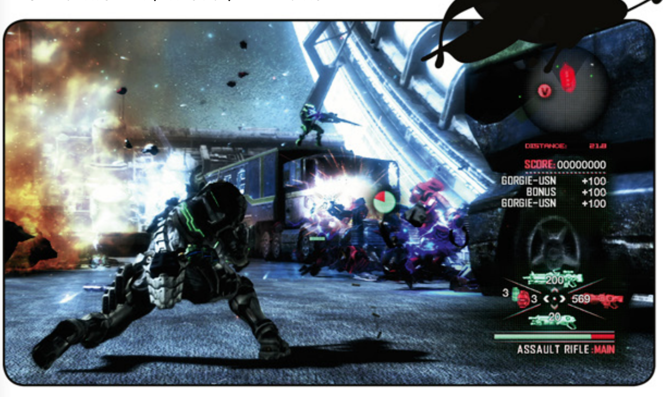
Hot Pursuit's Autolog makes multiplayer a little more personal. An ever-changing whirl of times, achievements and pictures, it doesn't just compare and update you with online buddies, but goads you into beating them, as the stark and undeniable numbers breed fierce competition. It structures an exceptional racer, binding singleplayer and multiplayer into a single social experience. Whether racers or otherwise, it really is hard imagining online gaming without something like it in the future.

THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST DEVELOPER

PLATINUMGAMES INC.

Platinum Games

KEY GAMES: **BAYONETTA, VANQUISH, INFINITE SPACE**



While many Japanese developers face increasing marginalisation in a global market, one studio has emerged with the uncanny knack of looking outward. Platinum Games' exceptional releases this year cross international boundaries while still maintaining the hallmarks of the Japanese action games that came before them. *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish* gleefully emphasise climactic action, backed by technical prowess that keeps them both beautiful to the eye and buttery smooth in the hand. Even if both threaten to overload you with audiovisual stimulation, they're still approachable by players of all skill levels, and boast beneath their facades of action and reaction magnificently nuanced battle systems for those who wish to excel to learn and master. Platinum makes hardcore games for the world, and in doing so, keeps the old standards alive.

Blizzard — RUNNER-UP

KEY GAMES: **STARCRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY, WORLD OF WARCRAFT**



The years Blizzard puts into making its games pay off, making them last far beyond the scant few weeks other titles have to jostle for the public's attention. *StarCraft II*'s irresistibly complex and layered ruleset looks sure to absorb its players for years, just as its forerunner did, while *WOW* still grips its vast and mature playerbase tight by continually redefining Azeroth with patches and expansions. The attention to detail and respect for players that underscore these efforts are second to none.

Harmonix Music Systems — RUNNER-UP

KEY GAMES: **ROCK BAND 3, DANCE CENTRAL**



It's fitting that *Dance Central* was released barely a week after *Rock Band 3*. The latter game – and the hardware that comes with it – is the culmination of a decade spent fusing musicianship with modern entertainment technology. *Dance Central*, meanwhile, uses the very newest technology to express the company's passion for music-inspired gaming in a whole new way. Viacom's decision to sell Harmonix might make financial sense, but based on this year's output couldn't be more misguided.



THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

KEY GAMES: **MASS EFFECT 2, NEED FOR SPEED HOT PURSUIT, ROCK BAND 3, FIFA 10**



Over the past year, no other traditional game publisher has done as much to look to the future than Electronic Arts. It was the first to significantly invest in videogaming's frontiers, whether on mobile or social networks, investments which have seen it dominate Apple's App Store bestsellers list and present its on-console properties to Facebook's userbase. EA is doing more than any other publisher to take its brands to gaming's unfurling audiences, then, but that doesn't mean it's forgotten its core playerbase, to which it has catered with some of the year's most outstanding games: *Mass Effect 2*, *NFS Hot Pursuit* and *Rock Band 3*. EA is still no stranger to dross, but its games are of undeniably higher quality than those of a few years ago. The result is the player within the old publishing guard that appears to be best equipped to face videogaming's rapidly changing landscape.

Sega — RUNNER-UP

KEY GAMES: **BAYONETTA, VANQUISH, INFINITE SPACE, FOOTBALL MANAGER 2011, NAPOLEON: TOTAL WAR**

It took bravery to sign up Platinum Games' first releases – its founders might be known for their legacy of great games, but not so much for big sales. And Sega has stood by *Vanquish*, *Bayonetta* and *Infinite Space*, propelling at least *Bayonetta* to significant success. It has also taken more risks with Sonic, leading to the purest takes on the formula for years. Sega might still be trying to find its modern-day identity, but putting invention first is a big step towards getting there.



PopCap — RUNNER-UP

KEY GAMES: **ZUMA BLITZ, PLANTS VS ZOMBIES**

There are many reasons to admire PopCap. There's its commitment to quality, only releasing its games when they're ready. There's its eye for universal appeal, capturing grandmas and gamers alike. But this award is for PopCap's policy of making its games available everywhere, catering to each platform with a version specifically designed for it – this year's highlights being *Zuma Blitz* for Facebook and *Plants Vs Zombies* for 360. It makes PopCap unique, and is a fundamental part of its success.



THE 2010 EDGE AWARD FOR
BEST HARDWARE
IPhone



This year has seen iPhone become so thoroughly established a piece of gaming hardware that games have become a practically inseparable part of owning it. Just look to the ubiquity of *Angry Birds*, *Cut The Rope*, *Fruit Ninja* and *Doodle Jump*. Game Center may have just added another gaming social network to the phone's roster, but is proof of Apple's commitment to games. As are the beefy specs of iPhone 4. Even last year's model, 3GS, proved itself capable of taking on Unreal Engine and winning with the tech demo *Epic Citadel*. IPhone 4's screen, though, is a revelation, its resolution making high definition portable and those games which support it look startlingly pristine. With Android gathering momentum and Microsoft re-entering the contest, iPhone will have to fight to keep its crown, but for now, there's no other portable device so capable, fascinating or important.

Kinect — RUNNER-UP

Few companies other than cash- and research-rich Microsoft could have pulled it off. And even then, it wasn't until E3 this year that it seemed possible it might do it. Weeks after launch, Kinect has inspired a vast audience; mothers and hackers alike have leapt upon it. As fun as they were, the launch games took few risks, failing to propose radical ideas for the radical technology. It's now up to developers to realise the true potential of one of the most exciting new technologies to reach the living room.



Move — RUNNER-UP

For a demo of Move's power, put the table tennis in *Kinect Sports* and *Sports Champions* side by side. Sony's game transforms the controller into a paddle replete with a throb of feedback when the ball connects. Holding still for dropshots banishes the idea that motion control is about waggle, just as other titles' augmented-reality tricks put paid to Microsoft's suggestion that controllers are creatively limiting in the first place. It lacks killer games right now, but Sony's controller is a powerful and precise tool.





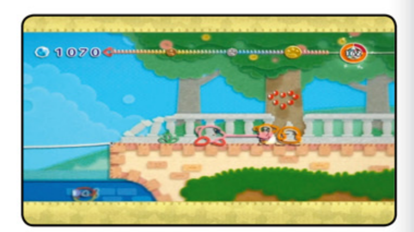
THE **ALTERNATIVE** EDGE **AWARDS** 2010

The things that grabbed our attention not because they were the best, but because they stood out from the rest

Most Unrelenting Violence — KIRBY'S EPIC YARN

FORMAT: **WII** PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO** DEVELOPER: **GOOD-FEEL, HAL LABORATORY**

Once upon a time there was a magical land where everything was made of wool! Even the people who lived there were made of bits of string. One day, Kirby was transported to this strange place, and proceeded to kill everyone he came across by tearing them apart or chucking them at their friends, including a pair of sweethearts he found sleeping beneath a tree. The end.



Best Bugs — FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA** DEVELOPER: **OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT**

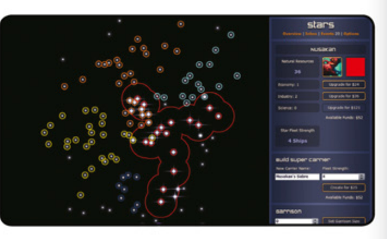
This ain't your daddy's QA nightmare. These days, lockups are small fry: for top-drawer glitching you have to see a man's head slowly rotate 360° while he tells you to relax. Obsidian's RPG has that and much, much more: dogs with detached, floating eyes; NPCs who skate around with their arms out before twanging into the sky. *Boiling Point*'s developers would be proud.



Most Effective Tool For Ruining Friendships — NEPTUNE'S PRIDE

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **IRON HELMET GAMES** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

The game ended six months ago and there are still sour glances exchanged over filing cabinets and frosty silences by the coffee machine. If you want to win in space, friends are a liability. Good luck remaining civil with a colleague after quietly inviting the planet-killing armada of The Cosmic Fist to xenocide them to pieces. Tech Level 2, Mr Fist? Why, you're too kind.



Most Aggravating Shopping Experience — HEAVY RAIN

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **SCE** DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**

Dead Rising 2's malls probably packed in a greater number of bodies, but even the brain-gobbling hordes couldn't prove as obstructive as *Heavy Rain*'s glassy-eyed shoppers, who bundle into the player with a perversity that is at first claustrophobic, then quickly ludicrous. We've tried shouting "Jason!" repeatedly in the street – people tend to move away from you.



Mightiest Flanks — RED DEAD REDEMPTION

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO**

Not since *Shadow Of The Colossus* have so many man-hours been spent upon the fine modelling of horse arse. The results speak for themselves: muscles undulate beneath a delicately velvety coat, bunching and stretching in concert with the powerful hooves. And then you plough straight into a moving train. When it comes to Euphoria-enabled death, four legs are even better than two.



Best Gateway Drug — TOY STORY 3

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE**

Every new gaming parent looks forward to the moment when they find that first title to pass on the magic of videogames to their child. For one of the **Edge** brood, that game was *Toy Story 3*, specifically its Toy Box mode, a rich sandbox of gaming interaction that has gently taught him the fine motor skills and inquisitive instinct that will stay with him for a lifetime.



Furriest Fur — KINECTIMALS

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS** DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS**

How can it be so glossy and fuzzy at once? We just don't know. Nor are we certain how much *Kinectimals* is pushing Xbox 360, but we'd wager a significant chunk of that power is being spent on those lovely fluffy pelts. It's all very well creating technology that lets players stroke their virtual pets, but it helps if they're this eminently stroke-worthy in the first place.





Slightest Return — APB

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **REALTIME WORLDS**

After five years in development and the receipt of over $100 million of investment, Realtime Worlds' *APB* released to tepid sales and even cooler reviews – a sorry saga that culminated in the studio's closure. At least everyone agreed that they liked the character customisation – but being able to run around in heart-covered underpants looking like Miyamoto only goes so far.



Wettest Game — HYDROPHOBIA

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **DARK ENERGY DIGITAL**

Murky, stultifying, soggy and invasive: the dark waters of *Hydrophobia* drip off the screen and leave you shivering and reeking from exposure to their choppy, changeable rhythms. What use would a breath gauge or accurate targeting be against such a relentless tide of well-modelled fluid dynamics? Many games are wet, but few are as wholly sodden as *Hydrophobia*.



Most Alternative Ego — DEADLY PREMONITION

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **RISING STAR** DEVELOPER: **ACCESS GAMES**

Backyard American towns can be lonely, confusing and deranged places. Especially when you're a lone, confused and deranged cop with an alter-ego named Zach. Forget the serial killing, obsessive coffee slurping and creepy twins, *Deadly Premonition*'s real secret is that it's a buddy-cop show with an invisible friend. Detective York makes talking to yourself look cool again, right, Zach?



Most Transformative Update — RED DEAD REDEMPTION

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR** DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO, ROCKSTAR NORTH**

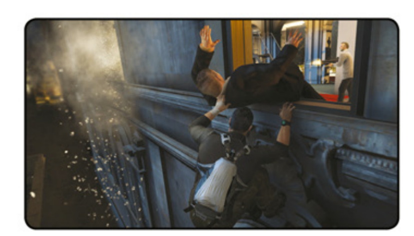
Rockstar could have got away with horse armour, the first DLC packs dealing out the odd multiplayer mode and raccoon-skin hat. Then Halloween brought the Undead Nightmare pack – as fulsome and fearsome a singleplayer reinvention as DLC has seen, recasting *RDR*'s characters in a skewed necromantic version of the Old West. The bar has been raised.



Most People Saying "Fisher" Angrily — SPLINTER CELL: CONVICTION

FORMAT: **360, PC** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT** DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTREAL**

"I'm not afraid of you, Fisher!" "Hey, Fisher, come here! Meet my baby!" "Die, Fisher! Die!" "It's not a gas leak, Fisher!" "Outrun *this*, Fisher!" "Looking for a plane, Fisher? C'mere! I'll make you fly." "You won't pass this *gun*, Fisher!" "You should've stayed with the lady, Fisher!" "You're pathetic, Fisher!" "Eat it, Fisher!" "You like the theatre, Fisher?"



Most Controllers Thrown At The TV — DEMON'S SOULS

FORMAT: **PS3** PUBLISHER: **ATLUS** DEVELOPER: **FROM SOFTWARE**

Quantum Theory made us shudder with world-ending rage. *The Fight* effortlessly induced military-grade swearing. But only *Demon's Souls* managed to elicit howls of pure anguish *and* compel us to continue regardless (after we'd had a nice lie down). Even Buddha himself would turn the air blue while attempting to complete world 5-1 in Black World Tendency.



Most Poignant Reminder Of Mortality — KINECT

FORMAT: **360** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**

Despite the Olympian physiques for which **Edge** staff are famed, recent reviews requiring full-body motion left us wheezing like punctured accordions, unable to even sit without grimacing. Kinect and its ilk have diversified the medium and rehabilitated the stereotype of the solitary, sedentary gamer – but, on the other hand, playing NES games never resulted in torn hamstrings.



Most Excitable Commentator — HUSKY

WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/USER/HUSKYSTARCRAFT

The world isn't short of *StarCraft* commentators with decent knowledge and dulcet tones. We watch Husky because, when the battle gets going, his fervour is unstoppable. Whether the game's a ten-minute flurry or an hour-long epic, his passion and his creativity in describing virtual death makes high-level play that little bit more comprehensible, and infectiously thrilling.



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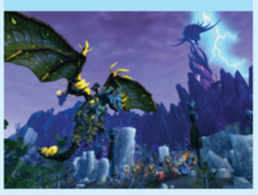
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

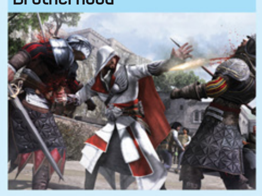
Edge's most played

World Of Warcraft



From apocalyptic portents to the coming of Deathwing, the road to *Cataclysm* has been enthralling. Now the world has changed, how could we not start it all over again?
MAC, PC, BLIZZARD

Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood



Ezio has once again tapped straight into our obsessive-compulsive weak point, this time having us do up the whole of Rome for him. Could hardly tell him no, though.
360, PS3, UBISOFT

Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit



An open road, the wind in our hair, the five-o in our dust and a spike strip ready for them… A shimmering chassis has never been so life-threateningly distracting.
360, PS3, PC, EA

Delayed gratification

When games aren't worth their wait in gold



It can hardly be said that *GT5*'s five years of development were a waste. But is it possible that more realistic ambitions would have led to a more polished game, released sooner?

In 1972, a psychologist at Stanford University carried out an experiment in impulse control and the deferral of pleasure. He gave a series of children a marshmallow, and told them that if they could resist eating it for 20 minutes, they'd get another. You can guess how well most of the four-year-olds got on, and how disappointed those who did wait would have been if the bonus treat failed to materialise.

When game developers delay a project, they make – explicitly or not – much the same promise, and crucially, they remove any element of choice on the part of consumers. Few developers will admit a release date is being pushed back due to technical issues, or studio strife. Instead, talk of applying more polish and an 'it'll be finished when it's finished' position is the norm.

These raised expectations, in turn, mean mounting pressure for the development team. The classic case study in delayed releases is *Duke Nukem Forever*, a game in development for so long that its hero has morphed from pastiche to throwback. The more it slipped, the more there was at stake, as the programmers and designers at 3D Realms struggled to ensure the company's only current-gen game lived up to the hype. The repeated engine upgrades also highlight that there's only so much polish that can be applied to a game before the tech at its heart becomes out of date.

Gran Turismo 5 was in development for five years – and at the time of release still wasn't quite done: a 133MB patch at launch was required to play online, swiftly followed by a second patch of equal size to address online issues. These weren't tweaks or fixes – they were hefty chunks of code dropped in to finish the game.

A side effect of the scale of *GT5*'s ambition is that players can see – with almost embarrassing clarity – exactly where it falls short. Would *GT5* seem a more polished, rounded package if many of the unfinished, poorly detailed standard car models weren't in it?

Making games is difficult work, requiring both technical and design ambitions to dovetail for success. But as games become increasingly complex and development costs increase, studios may have to choose carefully between the promises they can keep and the ambitions they don't quite have time to realise.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



GRAN TURISMO 5

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** POLYPHONY DIGITAL
PREVIOUSLY IN: E185, E212, E217









Gone are the days when you would be pitched against only a handful of other competitors. In *GT5* most races feature 12 competitors, but there's an upper limit of 16. Fortunately, that upper limit applies to multiplayer, too, leading to packed grids online

After a five-year wait, memories of the previous fully featured *Gran Turismo* game have begun to slide into the realm of nostalgia. Nostalgia, of course, has a rose-tinted hue, and it's this which threatens to throw *Gran Turismo 5*'s flaws into sharper relief than they deserve. In reality, Polyphony Digital's biggest crime is one of inertia; the most infuriating problems here are structural quirks buried deep within the DNA of the series, and as the sheer bulk of content borders on the unmanageable, they simply become harder to forgive.

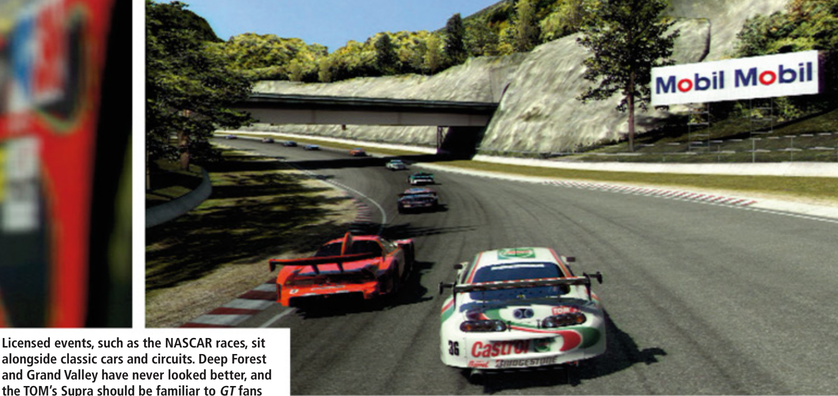
Gran Turismo's spider-web of menu screens has always felt daunting, and as more elements have been bolted on to the periphery, it's become positively labyrinthine. Usability isn't the priority here, and the biggest casualty is the much-anticipated online mode, which is mired by design that insists on running counter to the established norms. There's no invite system, for example; instead you have to manually send friends written invitations to join your 'lounge'. The social networking options allow you to post on a Facebook-inspired wall, view activity logs, donate cars or directly mail friends, but there is no option for mass mailouts or event organisation. Polyphony promises that the *GT5* community features are at an embryonic stage and will be refined and reworked in a series of patches, and they certainly need the attention.

> It's a virtual Matchbox collection, and much of the pleasure comes from shopping and tinkering and then feeling the results out on the circuit

It's all the more galling because with 16 players in a race, clumsy AI removed from the equation, and *Gran Turismo*'s remarkable physics engine at work, there's the potential for spectacular competition. The number-crunching going on under the bonnet is the game's most notable triumph, making *Gran Turismo 5*'s handling model a significant asset. In previous instalments cars tended to suffer either from excessive grip, allowing for cornering speeds that wouldn't look out of place on a Scalextric set, or catastrophic understeer that saw you inexorably gliding towards the outside barrier. *Gran Turismo 5* has defibrillated the rear end of its vehicles – they now squirm under hard braking, drift out if pushed beyond the limits of adhesion in sweepers, and with a deft touch can be caught on enthusiastic corner exits. There's a proportion of *Gran Turismo* players who are happy simply to pitch themselves against the Nurburgring's hallowed asphalt in an attempt to sculpt the perfect lap, and with the leap forward in vehicle dynamics, that eternal quest will be all the more rewarding.

Challenge the AI, though, and traditional *GT* rules apply. Driver skill takes a back seat





Licensed events, such as the NASCAR races, sit alongside classic cars and circuits. Deep Forest and Grand Valley have never looked better, and the TOM's Supra should be familiar to *GT* fans





Not all cars are created equal. Standard models don't have a cockpit view, nor do they suffer deformation in accidents. Even in a premium car you'll only see limited bumps and scrapes until you reach driver level 40, hours into the game





Hitting a wall in NASCAR can have dire consequences for your ultimate result. Lose the pack and you lose the 'draft' – the all-important slipstream that allows you to maintain pace with the other cars

to turning up with the correct equipment for the job. In all but the highest echelons, the key to success is often as straightforward as fitting race-spec slick tyres to your vehicle – the night and day difference in grip usually converts almost any car that meets the entry requirements into a potential winner. This assumes you're at a high enough level to enter the race in the first place, of course. In previous games, as long as you had the requisite licence and a car that met the entry requirements, you could enter any race. *GT5* keeps a much tighter reign on your progress, with an RPG-inspired levelling system that restricts you not only from certain events, but from purchasing certain cars until you have earned enough experience. Rather than adding depth, this artificial throttling of progress only makes the traditional *GT* grind more arduous, not least because the rate of progress slows as you ascend the ladder.

As a distraction, *GT5* offers a series of special events. Ranging from karting races through to NASCAR driving schools, and encompassing a tour of locations in Switzerland and Italy, this is where the game demonstrates that the throbbing engine at its heart is capable of remarkable variety. NASCAR in particular reveals itself to be a unique and exhilarating challenge, with a juddering violence that isn't evident in any other category.

The biggest break from tradition, though, lies in aesthetics. For a series that has long been committed to astonishing levels of fidelity, *Gran Turismo 5* can be remarkably unappealing. The 200 or so premium cars are genuinely stunning and, as a result, the game attempts to steer you towards them wherever possible – which is hardly surprising, given that the standard models are of noticeably poorer quality to the point that their wheel-arch textures reveal crude pixellation. The upshot is that the vast majority of vehicles in the game – and crucially many of the race-prepared models – can only be purchased when they happen to appear in the used car dealership. If you have your heart set on a particular model that isn't available in premium trim, saintly patience is a requirement.

In spite of its foibles, by sheer brute force of content and an overhauled physics engine *Gran Turismo 5* fulfils its primary objectives. It's a virtual Matchbox collection, and much of the pleasure comes from shopping and tinkering, and then feeling the results as you push the car out on the circuit. But this is a production that feels increasingly aged in the face of modern game design. The creeping and eventually overriding feeling is that this meticulously precise simulation, and its lovingly constructed catalogue of automotive history, deserved a little more game to come along for the ride. **[7]**



An unconventional approach to getting the A-License. Cars are much more pliant at the limits of grip, and slides like this are rarely as ruinous as they were previously

Poor marques



Anyone hankering after the most powerful production car in the game, the Bugatti Veyron, is likely to be disappointed when they finally get their hands on it. For a start, it's a standard rather than premium model, meaning it can't simply be bought from a dealership. Instead, you have to win it as the ultimate prize for the professional tier's GT World Championship. When you finally get hold of it you'll discover that, even on racing slicks, it handles like a beached supertanker. Worst of all, it can't be sold, only given away. Some prize.



DISNEY EPIC MICKEY

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: DISNEY INTERACTIVE **DEVELOPER:** JUNCTION POINT STUDIOS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E209, E211, E221

Oswald's tale turns out to be an emotional one. You may be more willing to put up occasionally drab platforming when the environment and story are tied together so tightly







The 2D platforming sections remain an enjoyable means of disguising in-game loading, even when you're experiencing them for the third or fourth time. While they're not particularly intricate, they often have a couple of tricks to discover – almost always with a collectable film can waiting for you upon completion

Disney's great videogame experiment begins with a torture scene, throwing its players into the midst of a botched live autopsy attempt on Mickey Mouse that involves a manacled operating table, a ceiling-mounted pen-knife and – most affectingly, as it turns out – a large rubber plunger. Coming just seconds after a lavishly whimsical pre-credit cinematic filled with magic mirrors and ageing wizards, it can be a bit of a shock to be present at an attempted disembowelling, but the intention is clear. After a minute or so in Disney's world, Warren Spector is pulling you into his, and it's a jarring and corrupted place, where the cheerily familiar rubs up against the horrifically comic. From that point, the game struggles to balance its two influences.

Visually, at least, it's a brilliant struggle to watch, with Junction Point's debut powered by the old and discarded aspects of Disney's heritage, leading the famous – but perhaps no longer entirely relevant – mouse through a wasteland for forgotten icons, where the company's original mascot, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, appears to have gone noisily insane. It's an autopsy of an entirely more successful nature, and the game's watercoloured innards are a regular joy to pick through. This is an ink-splattered yet intimately detailed muddle of broken-down animatronics and twitching decrepitude, where ailing fun-park rides wriggle and clank through polluted streams of paint thinner, where the utopian shafts and spars of '50s space rockets idle forever on launch pads, and where the geometry is often formed from leftover Disney memorabilia. One particularly striking sequence sends you up a trash-heap cliff-face built from old branded lunchboxes, jigsaw pieces, and the shattered hilt of a familiar Mickey Mouse telephone stand.

A brave and decidedly thorough attempt to reclaim Disney's fascinating past, in other words, *Epic Mickey* blithely ignores current money-spinners like Pixar and *Club Penguin* in favour of dusty references to Steamboat Willy and The Black Hole. It feels, at its best, like a brilliant folly: bold commercial suicide matched with an extravagant and distinctly melancholic world view. It's almost a shock, then, to find that the game beneath the art design often plays out in a more traditional manner than its trappings would suggest.



Ailing fun-park rides wriggle and clank through polluted streams of paint thinner, and '50s space rockets idle forever on launch pads

Scene-setting and difficult themes aside, the regular interruptions from hint text coupled with the simple array of tasks you're presented with mark this out as a thoughtfully produced children's game that does little to challenge its audience on the mechanical level. Choices and consequences ripple throughout and the overriding feeling is one of being on a wide, if rather short, pathway, but the bulk of the activities on offer involve simple treasure hunts, pleasantly speedy combat, and occasionally



Epic Mickey's paint and thinner mechanic never quite lives up to its billing, but spraying the roofs and gables off houses is pleasantly mischievous, and excellent audio design makes it weirdly convincing







Whether it's conjuring up warped topiary or ancient machinery, the hardware delivers a solid and appealing world. Is an HD PSN version out of the question?



Disneyland rides have nails sticking out of the sides and cogwork turning behind the scenes, while water features are polluted with pain thinner. If you're a fan of Disney's work, *Epic Mickey*'s references can be astonishingly complex to untangle



troublesome platforming. The latter is definitely the weakest part of the package, since Junction Point has aped the controls of *Mario Galaxy* while missing a lot of the polish. In the game's wider arenas, a slight floatiness can be forgiven, but in the beautiful 2D transition gauntlets, there's no escaping the fact that jumping and running can feel jerky and compromised.

On top of this simple framework, the addition of Mickey's paint and thinner powers are a likeable embellishment, allowing you to sketch in and rub out specific pieces of scenery in order to solve puzzles and hunt for hidden trinkets. It's wonderfully mischievous to walk around a pirate's Tiki village systematically wiping away parts of the landscape, and it works well as a gentle booster to the combat, too, with certain enemies and bosses allowing you to either wash them off the screen or paint them into a state of gloopy subservience. Certainly, the system's been tightly controlled in order for it to work at all, but the emphasis on balancing creation and destruction still makes a pleasantly nuanced change to the usual morality systems that Spector has helped to make ubiquitous.

There's no questioning Junction Point's engagement with the subject matter, but *Epic Mickey* ultimately serves to mirror aspects of Disney's works on a more fundamental – and perhaps unintended – level that goes beyond mere character and location design, however. With an approach to pacing that sees each challenge as little more than a means to open the portal to the next level, following Mickey's adventures can be a lot like barging through the clapboard fire doors of a fairground ride: a ponderous shuffle through beautiful but limited dioramas, with a few moments to check out the artistry of the forced perspectives before you're pushed towards another turn and a fleeting glimpse of the next piece of wonderful machinery. An exhibit as much as a game, then, and a skewed amble through animation history as much as an exercise in interactive storytelling, *Epic Mickey* may not always be entirely satisfying to play, but it's still enormously interesting to wander around with an eye open for the detailing. In the end, it's a pretty good compromise for a medium that, if we're being honest, already has its own Mickey Mouse. **[7]**

Oswald (below) refuses to be a pantomime villain, and what unravels is an ambiguous story. The game's all the better for it, and the tale's twists can often wrongfoot you

Lights, camera, animation

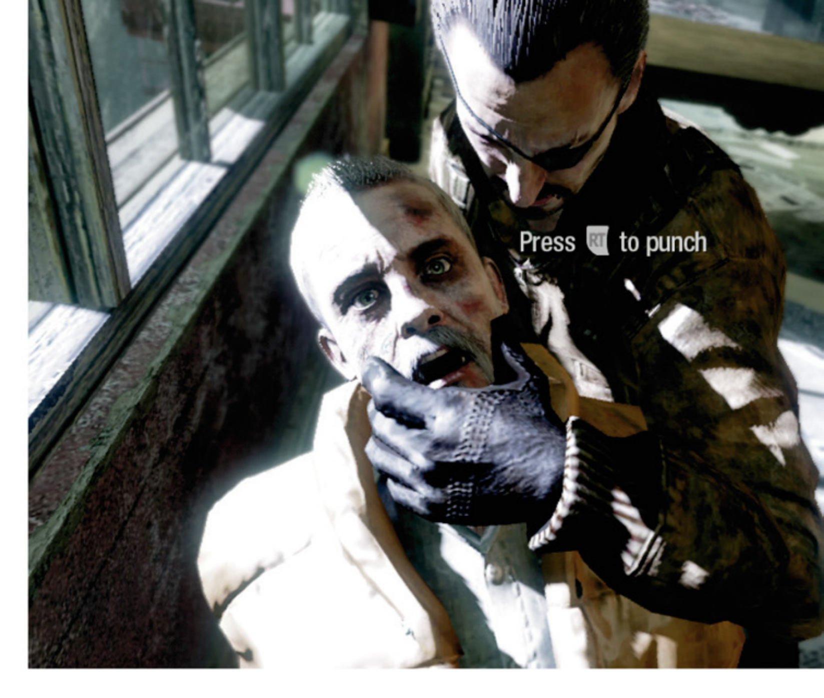


From animatics-influenced cutscenes to a Tron boss fight that revels in the limits of '80s visual effects, *Epic Mickey* does an astonishing job of building a sense of the handicraft world of animation development. The 2D platforming challenges between areas are delightfully artificial, with warping matte backdrops and juddering NPCs, while the more elaborate levels generally find room for a clapboard wall near the back on which the skybox has been sketched. Videogames have done cartoons and rollercoasters for years, but they've rarely looked at the mechanics with such a clear eye, or delivered such a witty – and honest – representation.

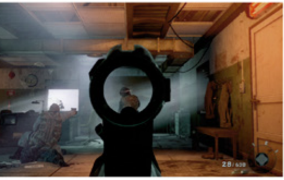


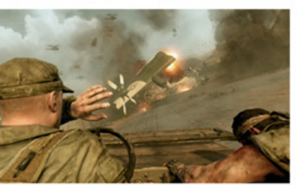
CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
RELEASE: NOW **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E216









Though the game includes vehicle sections in which you're merely along for the ride, you do get to take control every so often. It's a shame that the handling models appear to be fashioned after that of a milk float

Playing a new *Call Of Duty* can feel a little like Groundhog Day. Activision banks on it. The increasingly familiar hype campaign is launched, record pre-orders follow, and this year's update waltzes to the top of the Christmas charts. But *Black Ops* has an extra importance as the first Treyarch game since the Infinity Ward unpleasantness, and the narrative arc fed to the press is simple: this is going to be the B-team stepping up and knocking it for six. Like all action blockbusters, *Black Ops* should be a feel-good story.

The ambitious campaign focuses largely on a special forces operative named Alex Mason, an unlucky soul whose life consists of being shot at, being tortured or breaking down. One rare cutscene combines all three. It's a setup for short and snappy singleplayer missions, a connecting thread that Treyarch uses to flit between time periods and perspectives on what's going on.

It's a neat idea, shuttling you between humid jungles, Arctic bunkers and vehicle sections. Unfortunately, the mission design fails to do it justice. *Black Ops* takes the 'action blockbuster' label literally: Mason is frequently led through 'stealth' sections by an unyielding (though beautifully animated) NPC, and deviating from The Path That Is Decreed means instant mission failure. It's cinematic, and you're ostensibly in control, but it's not much of a game. There are many firstperson interludes that build anticipation but lead nowhere. At one point you climb into the cockpit of what looks like a stealth bomber and simply have to hold the trigger to take off, an experience that inevitably leaves you feeling a bit empty.

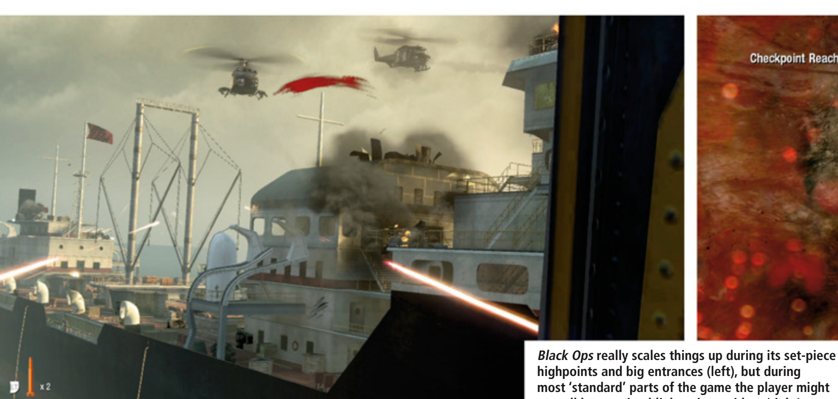


> The spectacle makes it worthwhile. Black Ops is beautiful at times, and transitions from painstaking detail to breathtaking vista within the same level

The enemies are the same mob of dummies seen in many *COD*s before. The environments have changed but the furniture remains present, and battles are still a matter of shooting and then moving across the invisible line to trigger the next scripted sequence. On Veteran difficulty, it's the same old tin-can shoot, a process of learning positions as you die, over and over.

As ever, it's the spectacle that makes it worthwhile. *Black Ops* is beautiful at times, and transitions from painstaking detail to breathtaking vista within the same level, often riffing on familiar depictions of war to great effect. In one standout sequence, driving a gunboat down a river in a certain place to a certain song, *Black Ops* channels a cinematic moment to create an interactive one, something so obvious it has to be surrendered to with a big smile. The boat's handling is lousy, and shooting the respawning enemies soon palls, but just for a moment it's a brilliant pop-culture fusion.

That aside, this is no *Modern Warfare* experience. The narrative hammers home its ripped-off twist clumsily, Mason feels like a nonentity, and certain sequences wouldn't





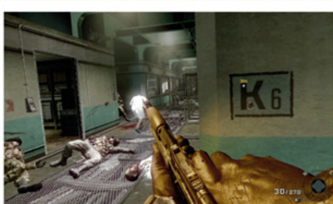
Black Ops really scales things up during its set-piece highpoints and big entrances (left), but during most 'standard' parts of the game the player might as well be wearing blinkers in corridors (right)





Though Mason provides a connection, there are several bit-players and a generous spread of environments over his career. Places like Vietnam receive the Hollywood treatment – the grunts' lines are familiar, and the style is lifted wholesale

Enemy animations are a mixed bag: when getting into cover they look authentic, but when shooting, standing or crouching they're prone to looking stiff. However, facial details and lip-synching have been implemented with a good deal of flair





look out of place in *Ghost Squad*. This is also the most gratuitously violent *COD* yet, and often ludicrous – one mission begins with a man being force-fed glass before being punched repeatedly on the jaw, after which the victim leads the player through the level while shouting. Such absurdity is *Black Ops* in a nutshell.

The multiplayer is more familiar, the changes *Black Ops* makes to the *Modern Warfare* template proving mostly iterative or cosmetic. The truly new is rare but, fresh or not, this is still one of the finest online shooters available. Wagers are an excellent addition, as the credits earned in matchmaking for unlocking weapons and kit can also be gambled in certain gametypes. This is a neat enough option, but this mode's genius is in the weird gametypes it offers. Sticks And Stones gives each player an explosive crossbow and ballistic knives to rack up kills – but also a tomahawk that will reset the score of any player it kills. Getting hit by one is galling, while striking someone at the crucial moment to take the pot is exhilarating.

Most changes are so minor you barely notice. *Modern Warfare 2*'s Commando perk (which increased the radius of knife attacks) was a cause of ire for many, so it's gone; the tomahawk replaces *MW2*'s throwing knife. What's going on is, for good and bad, the same as ever: certain modes, like Sabotage, can be ruined if some goon gets an attack chopper and begins circling the other team's spawning positions. Overpowered killstreaks, spawn-killing and frequent enquiries as to our sexual orientation all characterise online play, but that's just *COD*, and *Black Ops* reins in *MW2*'s more ridiculous excesses.

As for maps, *Black Ops* comes with a generous 14 that are great playgrounds. The cheery NukeTown is a nuclear testing town with two suburban houses, their yards and the road between, where the debris and vantage points create a kaleidoscope of different views across the middle. It's a small map, but the battles always feel huge. And the other stages are distinctive, too, taking in a firing range full of artificial moving targets, a mess of walkways and factories, and an overgrown jungle. We've rarely found a safe camping spot, not for the want of trying, and the mix of tight spaces and long views is unpredictable enough that games haven't yet fallen into regular patterns.

The campaign may not have the chops, but *Black Ops* repackages one of the best multiplayer shooters around. That's clearly enough for millions of fans, but it makes it far from a must-have – you probably own the best bits already. As polished and pretty and fun as *Black Ops* often is, it feels more like a yearly update than a sequel, a new campaign with old multiplayer. The game isn't distinct from its predecessors in any important way, and fatigue sets in quicker than before. The feel-good story will have to wait. **[7]**

President evil



The saving grace of *World At War* was Nazi Zombies, a fourplayer co-op mode which tasked a team with defending a location from an undead horde. *Black Ops* adds plenty more to the mix, as well as indulging in a scenario that sees JFK, Nixon, Castro and Secretary of State McNamara besieged in the Pentagon. With a few friends it's a riot, the soundbites are hilarious, and exploring every corner of the locations becomes an objective in itself. The only bum note is shared with the original Nazi Zombies: things don't heat up until the fifth wave, so the first five minutes of every game are a dull trudge.

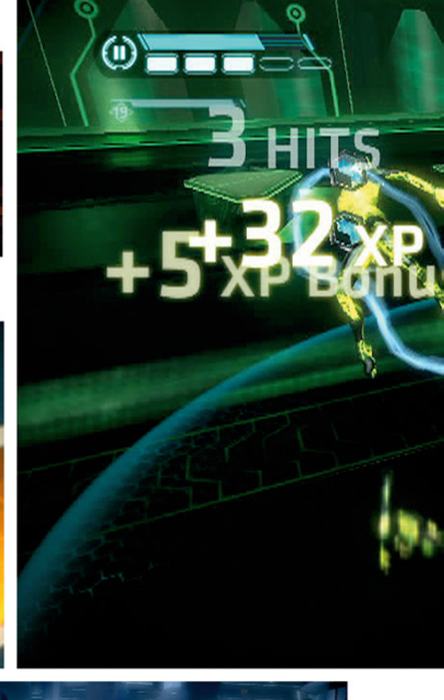


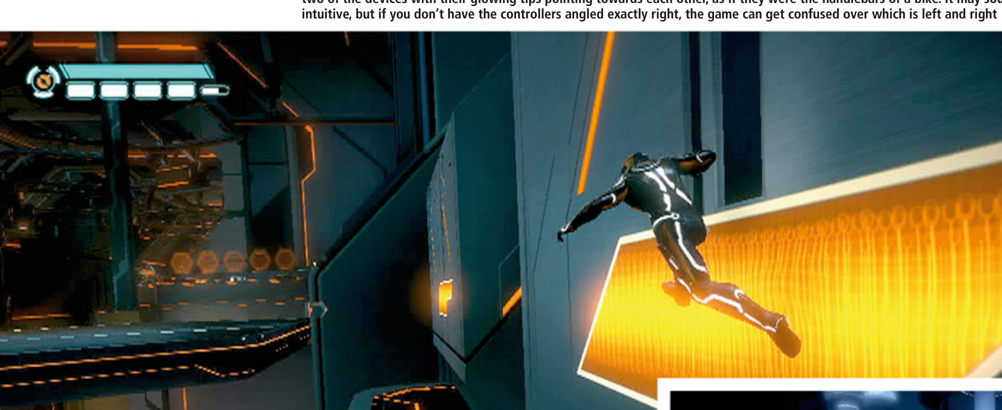
As you'd expect, the firstperson viewpoint gets a good shake whenever something nearby explodes – which is quite often. Neat as this is, it's familiar, and *Black Ops* often follows it with too little substance





Lightcycle sections (above right) give you the option of using Move controllers (there's no Kinect support). You need to hold two of the devices with their glowing tips pointing towards each other, as if they were the handlebars of a bike. It may sound intuitive, but if you don't have the controllers angled exactly right, the game can get confused over which is left and right





You'll often find yourself having to target the floating, glowing grapple points mid-flight – but it's pretty unreliable. Sometimes you'll see the grapple point, hit the target button, but simply plunge straight past



TRON: EVOLUTION

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: PROPAGANDA GAMES

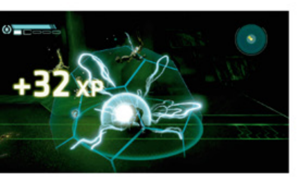
Chalk another one up to historical precedent, then: when games have so much trouble meeting their own deadlines, nailing them to a movie's release date has rarely proven wise. In *Tron: Evolution*'s case, there was a vain hope for greater things. For one, this is a game based on a film about gaming, chock full of neon-trimmed arcade sport, with road battles between speeding lightcycles and disc-flinging digital duellists. Encouragingly, Propaganda Games doesn't offer a lazy rehash of the new movie's action either, opting to bridge the gap between Tron and Tron: Legacy with a thirdperson parkour adventure in the style of *Prince Of Persia*, its platforming trials interspersed by bouts of arena combat, underpinned by a handful of unusually playful ideas. There's even a young Jeff Bridges in a leotard.

These good intentions are certainly promising, but although the game's cutscenes and voice-acting chops point to an intriguing larger world (see 'Give us a CLU'), the signs of a hurriedly curtailed development are clear to see at a mechanical level. Its best ideas are implemented raw, and often come unstuck, while the vehicle sections seem only to have been given cursory consideration. In places, *Tron: Evolution* doesn't feel like it was played through even once before release.

The lack of fine-tuning (or plain old tuning) is most galling in the platforming sections – perhaps because, unlike the game's various bugs and glitches, this is so clearly something that could have been addressed to vastly improve the game, if only there had been another few months of development. Although *Tron: Evolution* drives you down rigidly prescribed routes, it manages to be erratic in how it interprets your actions: one leap into the unknown will see you drawn with intractable magnetism to a certain hold, yet other wall runs and vaults will propel you repeatedly into the abyss, before some imperceptible change to the rhythm of your movement determines the jump a success.

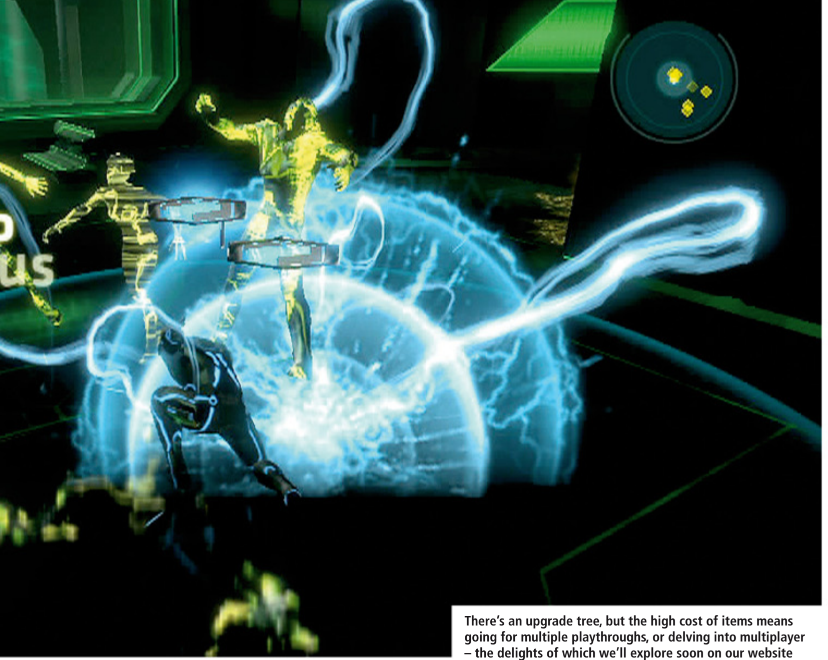
The camera is a near-constant problem, often pulling too tightly into your character or refusing to show your next platforming objective. When this is a grapple point – which needs to be onscreen to be targetable at all – such a failing naturally proves to be a considerable annoyance. Even when they are visible, grapple points sometimes ignore your attempts to target them mid-jump, allowing you to sail past to your death. Restarts are lenient, but that's small consolation when the reasons for your death are unclear. Even when it works, it rarely offers the unbroken momentum seen in *Prince Of Persia* or *Assassin's Creed*. Tron's stark geometry and neon lines make for minimalist and occasionally gorgeous environments, but the colour scheme sometimes comes at the expense of illuminating required platforming routes. At other times the monotone world simply feels basic and dull.

Platforming is broken by combat sections in which you face off against waves of





We've been killed during cutscenes and had to restart levels because the scripting didn't trigger to allow us to exit an area. At least there's a grim irony to wrestling with bugs and glitches in a game set within a virtual reality



There's an upgrade tree, but the high cost of items means going for multiple playthroughs, or delving into multiplayer – the delights of which we'll explore soon on our website

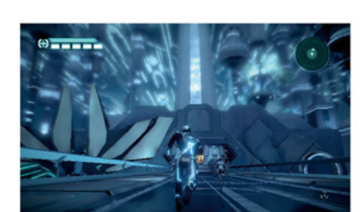
The tank is so achingly slow that it's advisable to take out enemies before you enter their line of fire. This means inching forward to peek around objects

opponents before being allowed to proceed – and it's in the parkour-powered fighting system that *Tron: Evolution* shows the greatest novelty. You have two weak basic moves which quickly become pointless, except to parry blows; heavy-hitting attacks, meanwhile, rely on an energy bar which is replenished by vaulting off computer consoles and what appear to be glowing rubbish bins. So too do you recover health by wall-running along the strips of neon which flank the arenas, encouraging you to establish circuits around them to keep yourself fighting fit.

Although this enforced movement is a contrivance, it's not totally out of place in a game with such an overt arcade inspiration, and there is satisfaction in trading slick moves for health and in finding the right route to fuel your fight most effectively. But dashing round and round the environments begins to pall when the battles are so protracted, and not all of the ways in which the game varies subsequent waves of enemies fit well with the mechanics of movement. More powerful opponents often have specific weaknesses to the various flavours of flying disc you find during the game, and often arrive in combinations to test your ability to chop and change. It's frantic stuff, and sometimes more than a little messy – mostly because your ability to target enemies is so skittish. Enemies who are weak only to parries need to be prioritised, but the reticule will frequently flip to another lesser opponent at the last second or spin you 180 degrees to send your disc sizzling into a wall or empty space.

The game struggles to find enough variety. Many of the combat encounters, although checkpointed with reasonable generosity, long outstay their welcome – and yet you can't wait to return to them the second the game drops you into a lightcycle. These woeful sections bounce you down a track whose challenge flits between negligible and instant death – but perhaps they have to be simplistic to account for the extreme sluggishness of the optional Move control scheme. Similarly bleak are the game's tank sections: numbing affairs which aim for cathartic carnage but simply result in a mindless trundle from point A to point B, occasionally snagging your tracks or blocking your shots with poor collision detection.

So many movie tie-ins aim low and deliver low, cramming a film into an inappropriate genre and relying on QTEs to mop up any interactions of actual interest, so it's to Propaganda's credit that it has attempted something more ambitious in scale, and briefly novel in the conception of its combat. But the promise is left unrefined, its battles reduced to rigmarole through repetitious padding. Platforming only ever threatens to be acceptable, lacking both the freedom and finesse that further development time might have granted, while the lightcycle sections – well, there might not be any way of saving them. There is merit here which could have emerged after a longer gestation, but its premature release has ensured that its potential is largely de-rezzed. **[5]**



It bridges the gap between Tron and Tron: Legacy with a thirdperson parkour adventure in the style of Prince Of Persia



The gameworld itself can look sumptuous, with its clean lines and shimmering towers of light, but on rare occasions the use of flat colours makes it difficult to tell what is a platform and what is empty space

Give us a CLU



The plot assumes that you've seen the first film, in which Flynn (Jeff Bridges) enters a virtual world where programs are people, and throws discs at them in an effort to expose corporate wrongdoing. Since that escapade, the virtual world has evolved, giving birth to programs without specific purpose. A civil war with the original programs then ensues, fomented by CLU 2, a program of Flynn's own creation. Though the voice-acting is of high quality, the tale's told a little hurriedly here and it's hard to grasp the significance of all the players. Still, it does a fair job of teeing up the new movie.



SPLATTERHOUSE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NAMCO BANDAI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E218, E222

The original *Splatterhouse* was a trashy gorefest that perfectly replicated the idiocy of mid-'80s straight-to-video slasher flicks. Namco's reimagining launches the franchise into modernity, but is far less stylistically assured.

The action follows goatee-bearded loser Rick Taylor who awakens at the beginning of the game in a pool of blood, his girlfriend missing, presumed kidnapped by the mad Doctor West. An evil spirit persuades the forlorn emo kid to don the Terror Mask, which gives him superhuman powers, and he pops off for some revenge – and in this game revenge means endless dismemberment.

Naturally, the doctor's maniacal mansion is filled with monsters, the results of his demented biological experiments. These must be battered into bloody pulp via the game's achingly familiar hack'n'slash combat mechanic. A simple punch button is accompanied by a more powerful chargeable haymaker, as well as a throw move – all of which can be combined to produce more powerful attacks. The system uses every button on the pad, a factor that the developmeant team no doubt believed would add depth, but, via some illogical, ill-conceived combinations, can end up being frustrating and confounding. Next to *God Of War III* or even *Darksiders*, it feels like a dated and clunking setup.

Blood from felled enemies can be used to charge a meter that gives access to amusing berserker moves, and players can also buy power-ups to add new specials. What you should get is a swelling tide of gore, building to crescendos of gut-splattered mayhem with every boss battle. After ten minutes of combat, however, you're so deadened to the constant shower of cel-shaded body parts and screen-smearing putrescence that there are few truly surprising moments of gristle-popping body horror left. Level design, too, is flat and uninvolving, a pop-up haunted house with only the odd disturbing scenic flourish to grab your dulling attention.

But the game is not without a certain twisted charm. Although the presentation is inconsistent, lurching messily from high Gothic to cheap torture porn in the swish of an axe, *Splatterhouse* revels in its exploitation movie feel. Dark one-liners are thrown about and the finishing moves are so ludicrously violent that Lucio Fulci would be proud.

But really, what we're left with is an update that is out of date, a reimagining without enough imagination. To be this simplistic, the game needed a masterful melee system and a range of inspiring enemies; it tries, but it doesn't fully deliver on either count. And why no co-op horde-style mode? Not every title needs multiplayer, of course, but a survival romp would have made perfect sense here. Bereft of such modern trappings, Namco's reanimated monster flails awkwardly with one gangrenous foot still trailing in the grave. **[5]**

Retro horror



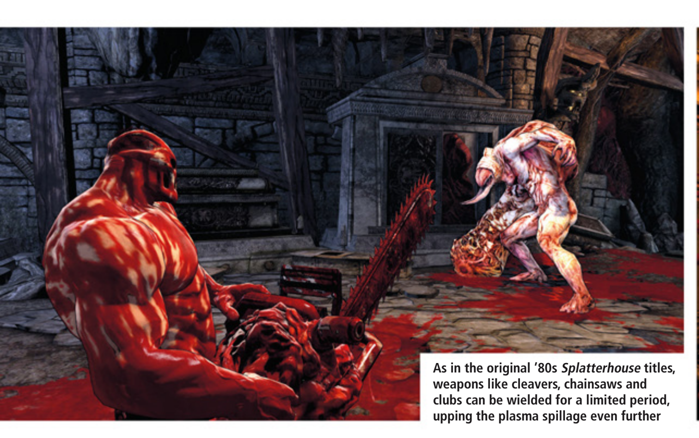
For true fans, the original *Splatterhouse* games can be unlocked and played in all their pixelated glory, once you've completed the story mode. But the new title also throws in a few 2D sections that pay homage to the earlier trilogy. Although frustratingly tough at times thanks to the stodgy sprint and jump controls, they're slickly produced, with some great John Carpenter-style wobbly synth music (a merciful release from the main game's grinding metal rawk). Some players may come to wish that Namco Bandai had made the entire game as a downloadable side-scroller.



There are some fine visual effects borrowed from modern horror flicks: the Gothic background scenery fades to monochrome amid truly berserk moments of bloodshed



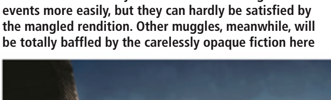
The unlockable moves and combos eventually even the odds against multiple foes. Plus, grabbing enemies and spinning them around batters others out of the way



As in the original '80s *Splatterhouse* titles, weapons like cleavers, chainsaws and clubs can be wielded for a limited period, upping the plasma spillage even further







Fans of the books may be able to follow the game's events more easily, but they can hardly be satisfied by the mangled rendition. Other muggles, meanwhile, will be totally baffled by the carelessly opaque fiction here



HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS PART 1

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3, WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA **DEVELOPER:** EA BRIGHT LIGHT

"Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!" says Harry Potter as he casts spells. We agree: the game does. This has been positioned as the first Harry Potter title for gamers, and sharp wits quickly dubbed it *Gears Of Wand*. It's true that gamers will easily recognise its crude outline, but those hoping for Marcus Fenix in a wizard's hat will be quickly disappointed.

HPATDHP1 borrows *Gears*' over-shoulder camera and the ability to take cover, and allows Potter to fire off spells with the speed and percussive rattle of a machine gun – but at this point EA Bright Light's imagination sputters out. Around this basic core is a framework that's bare, botched and boring, with a cover-shooter sop at its centre that would never be enough to excuse its mindless, clumsy implementation or the agonising dullness of all that surrounds it.

Potter and chums work through linear environments, pausing every few yards to zap Death Eater wizards by peppering them with Stupefy spells. Your foes exhibit no intelligence and the auto-aim is so enthusiastic that the player only needs to look at the screen to unhitch Harry from the scenery, or pull the camera out of a wall. As you progress, you gain more spells – most of which have confusingly similar descriptions. One acts as a sniper rifle, but is scuppered by the magical equivalent of parallax error – nauseatingly, your viewpoint zips down the path of each shot, but often misses by yards or gets blocked by scenery which wasn't in the way of your reticule. There's a flabby shotgun spell and a rocket launcher too, but given the time required to change spells, it's always easier just to tap off a few more quickfire Stupefy blasts until an enemy falls over.

The game also attempts stealth sections. They're awful, but if you squint your eyes you can almost detect the feint evidence of ingenuity. Donning an invisibility cloak, Potter meanders among bad guys in firstperson; the cloak's charge drains as you move or if you get to close to an enemy. But this idea is put to no creative use, as levels are simply filled with enemies who jerk along their AI paths with little predictable comparison to human behaviour. Your tunnel vision, meanwhile, leaves you bouncing into walls or caught on low furniture. If you're close to running out of charge you have to stop and wait impatiently for it to refill.

Fans will find JK Rowling's beloved material garbled: events lurch on without any apparent connection, and at certain points the game gives up on a cogent narrative altogether to offer a choice of filler missions, which return to locations for fallacious reasons or throw you into unrelated vignettes – you turn up in a dragon's cave at some point, no explanation given, while a disused sub-station is recycled over and over.

It's hard to come away from this without a sense of persecution. It isn't just that it's a poor game, it's that it thinks it's good enough to survive on the coat-tails of its licence – and that you won't have the wherewithal to discriminate. Maybe that's true of those looking for stocking-fillers, but if EA wants to convert a portion of that vast game-naïve Harry Potter audience, then it should realise that this sort of piffle isn't going to enchant anyone. **[3]**





As well as rattling off spells with the right trigger, the odd blast of left-bumper defensive magic is needed to deter the ghostly Dementors (above left). Potions, meanwhile, can be thrown as grenades – equipping one replaces your ability to fire spells, yet without giving any visual indication that this has occurred



Levels consist of ugly, incoherent expanses of geometry – there is no great art to their construction, the pace of your travel across them or the placement of enemies. Some are so cramped as to be unsuited to your camera's movement through them

Thauma-turgid



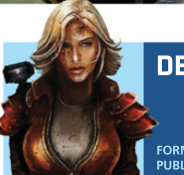
Kinect (but not Move) functionality is restricted to a separate challenge mode. It turfs players into a series of arenas which they navigate on rails, wiggling an arm back and forth through the air as Potter (and optional second player Ron) automatically aim at enemies. If it wasn't for the rapid arm cramping, it would put you to sleep. Each challenge details just one offensive spell – most likely because the spells involve fairly similar actions and it has enough trouble recognising when you're trying to toss a potion. It's also near impossible to die: it took a whole minute of standing still in plain sight before we succumbed to the seven enemies before us.







Dead Nation certainly knows how to fling the undead at you in vast quantities. An anonymous art style, however, means the visuals lack the punch of other, more abstract twin-stick shooters



DEAD NATION

FORMAT: **PS3** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **SCE** DEVELOPER: **HOUSEMARQUE**



The cars liberally cast around most levels make for mini set-pieces, as you trigger their alarms to distract the horde, or blow them to pieces from a safe distance

It's hard to know whether to blame underpowered weapon feedback or the sickly over-saturation of both zombies and twin-stick shooters: either way, *Dead Nation* isn't quite the experience it deserves to be. Somewhere within the plodding levels and grindy combat is a moody and atmospheric action title from one of the better teams in the business. To say that Housemarque has created the ultimate game about running around in the dark while shooting, though, shouldn't be mistaken as an indication that the developer has found many hidden reserves of entertainment in that mechanic.

Dead Nation's straight-faced virus-outbreak story translates to a decent range of levels spilled out across a world that's already fallen to pieces. Wrecked cars and piles of flaming trash litter the game's darkened streets, and although the locations you'll visit – spooky fairgrounds, a nasty hospital – suggest that creative atrophy set in quite early on, they're still stylishly lit and atmospherically smothered beneath cinematic swirls of snow and ash.

They're annoying to navigate, however. Regular dead-ends result in a frustrating trudge, while the technically laudable numbers of zombies spawning from almost every point on the map mean that the key to pathfinding is all too often a matter of simply wandering around until you come across the next checkpoint. Even then, doors that won't open until you've killed a certain number of enemies crop up far too regularly. Such deadly bottlenecks are exciting at first, but the artificial tension can't survive ten levels of repetition.

Cheap-thrills level design could be forgiven if the combat was consistently good, but while *Dead Nation* has suitably icky animation and an abundance of fine ideas – cars you can shoot to trigger distracting alarms or cause explosions, a multiplier that needs constant nursing, and sections where the streetlamps flicker out and the feeble beam from your flashlight creates a palpable claustrophobia – the toothless weapons and mindless hordes you face in the regular pinch-points drain a lot of the fun from the experience. You can upgrade and unlock a range of familiar and well-balanced armaments, but you'll struggle to give any of them much charisma (the excellent blade cannon being a notable exception), and while there are zombies that stomp on you, zombies that saunter up and casually explode with a cosmopolitan twinkle in their dead eyes, and a handful of other specials, the game resolutely refuses to become a top-down version of *Left 4 Dead*, even when you're enjoying the slick online co-op. Damningly, the most entertaining trick comes in the form of a recharging dash that has been imported directly from the developer's previous game, *Super Stardust HD*. Elsewhere there's a smart meta-challenge that sees zombie killers around the globe competing by territory, but the levels by themselves may struggle to inspire that kind of dedication.

Perhaps *Dead Nation*'s faults are ultimately the result of its unsatisfying graft of two popular ideas. Housemarque has certainly put in the effort, but the twin-stick shooter might simply be more rewarding when you're skidding over the smooth-scrolling surface of one of *Super Stardust*'s wraparound arenas than stumbling through darkened alleyways with a tangle of undead shambling after you. The peerless control offered by the genre's move and shoot mechanics feels compromised by the grimy world, so while *Dead Nation* is still entirely playable, it feels trapped in a disappointing limbo. **[5]**

Dark horizons



Perhaps _Dead Nation_'s most singular contribution to the twin-stick shooter comes in its willingness to turn the lights out, leaving you fumbling knee-deep in the undead with the screen illuminated only by muzzle flashes. It's a visceral thrill, and a bold design choice, but it's one that sours relatively quickly as the levels turn into paceless slogs. Even when the streetlamps are working, a muddle of particle effects and too much detailing at too great a distance make for a rather unreadable game.





While lacking *Dragon Quest IX*'s dynamic sense of space, the turn-based battles are attractively detailed and packed with suitably painful-looking pyrotechnics



GOLDEN SUN: DARK DAWN

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: CAMELOT PREVIOUSLY IN: E217

For the myriad job classes in the JRPG, there is a noticeable lack of quality dungeon architects. Above ground, *Dragon Quest IX* maintains a rich sense of place; beneath snake drab labyrinths. Not so in *Golden Sun*. Camelot understands that braving a temple is the height of derring-do, and so its designers must supply a suitable place to derring-do it in. Thus, *Golden Sun* borrows liberally from the *Zelda* design manual. Dungeons are obstacle courses to be bested with 'psynergy' abilities, telekinetic takes on Link's kitbag of yanking, burning and freezing tools.

The powers are not as organically playful as Link's toys, however. Rather than offer single items with multiple applications, Camelot constantly adds new powers to an expanding list of context-sensitive spells. If these vine-growing, water-evaporating, scent-sniffing forms of magic feel rigid in themselves, dungeon designs do a lot to hide it. Like the best *Zelda* temples these are grand mechanical constructs, networks of smaller puzzles that loop around into a greater whole. Whether filling aqueducts or powering furnaces, there's a thrill in teasing life from epic, lifeless machines.

The story plays a large part in this. Set 30 years after the GBA offerings, the land of Weyard is still recovering from those cataclysmic events. Not only a good excuse to reset the story – though newcomers are cleverly filled in (see 'Previously on…') – it gives our heroes a landscape in desperate need of fixing. With dilapidated technologies to renew and warring factions to reconcile, the quest doesn't feel artificially laid over a fantasy setting, but an intrinsic part of it. It is let down only by a humourless script – Camelot should exchange a level designer for one of *Dragon Quest*'s localisers.

Despite the seven-year gap, *Dark Dawn*'s template has evolved little from the GBA originals. Game time is divided between dungeon exploration and a *Pokémon*-lite adventure to catch elemental Djinn. Not only are these sprites rewarding to catch in their own right – often squirrelled away in environmental puzzles – but they are the heart of *Golden Sun*'s combat system. Allocating Djinn defines character classes and spell sets – the twist being that, if used and exhausted, their owner no longer benefits from the statistical boost.

Exhausted Djinn can be used to summon even bigger creatures – monstrous 3D creations that push the hardware to its graphical limits – at the cost of an even longer recovery period. In effect, our heroes have a series of defensive layers that can be stripped away for an offensive rush. Statistical charges and retreats lend fights a distinctive rhythm, not to mention being ripe for experimentation. Deliberate Djinn use might swap you from a brawler to a medic mid-battle, for example. In conjunction with a gentle encounter rate, it means combat refuses to stale over the game's 30 hours.

An intelligent system, then, but one for which Camelot fails to find a suitable threat. Bar a handful of bosses, *Dark Dawn* is a pushover, never requiring you to brave the combat's depths. Yes, it grants breathing room for testing unlikely combinations, but we'd have liked to put our mastery to the test. It's a shame the series' link-up play has been removed, too: providing better impetus to master combat than any in-game monster, it would have been a natural Wi-Fi fit on DS. Despite its lack of teeth, though, *Golden Sun* remains a franchise with plenty to say. **[8]**





You can control the hero with D-pad controls or stylus prods. The stylus is a natural fit for aiming psynergy – more so than awkward shoulder-button jabs. That said, mapping powers of choice to the shoulder buttons does allow quick progress through more repetitive puzzles





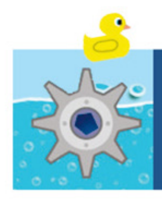
Summons (above) are mostly updates of old favourites. If dropping the 2D art style loses some of the charm, these hulking beasts capture a sense of scale the GBA hardware never could. Exploration (left) is constantly rewarded, whether it's a hidden Djinn or tiny puzzle shrines housing new summons. And, yes, using rain on fire does count as a puzzle

Previously on...



Rather than bore long-term fans with needless exposition, *Dark Dawn* welcomes newbies with an interactive glossary. Any term pertaining to the GBA games links to a definition on the top screen. Furthermore, these earlier events have entered the mythology of the world and are retold in collectible picture books. The masterstroke, however, is the in-game tutorial that forces our heroes to run an obstacle course based on their predecessors' adventures. Here we witness the GBA events firsthand, albeit rebuilt from rickety plywood and cardboard. Battling paper effigies of old foes is the perfect blend of function and narrative. Dare we say it's the best tutorial ever?

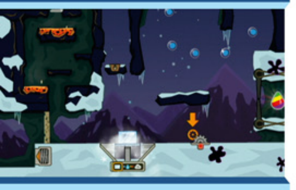
As you might expect, lava is often fatal, shrinking the size of your pool from a respectable puddle to the kind of dribble you might find at the bottom of the bath. Fortunately, there are plenty of spare water globules floating around



HYDROVENTURE

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (US), DECEMBER 24 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** CURVE STUDIOS

Camera obscurer



One of *Hydroventure*'s neatest tricks involves the native water form, which will split up into smaller drops if you hit an obstacle. When this happens you suddenly find yourself controlling dozens of water particles rather than one, and all via the same simple tilting motions. The game logic and camera get around this potential confusion by making the largest body of water the 'active' one – the only one capable of moving switches. It's not a completely flawless system, but obviously it's preferable to having water appear as one unbroken mass.

The idea behind *Hydroventure* is simple – so simple that it's difficult to believe it hasn't been fully realised until now. In this WiiWare title, you play as a small amount of liquid, sloshing back and forth (and tipping the screen along with you) by tilting the Wii Remote. Like *LocoRoco*, then, or the iPhone hit *Rolando*, but with a much greater focus on puzzle-solving.

Hydroventure's water recalls that of *PixelJunk Shooter*, flowing with a believable sense of weight and momentum, and adjusting to the contours of the land. The game punishes sloppy players by evaporating any droplets that have been separated and left stranded for too long (thus deducting their mass from your health bar), but this is easily remedied when you learn the Gather move, which uses pressure to bind the elements together again.

Although the basic joy of rolling realistic water around might be short-lived, it's bolstered by the far greater satisfaction of solving the game's intuitive, well-paced puzzles. The world, which is split into four separate parts and selected from a global map, is of the *Metroid* variety, unfurling gradually as you steadily acquire a respectable array of abilities. The most important of these are the two alternate forms, Ice and Cloud, which can be selected at any of the conveniently placed terminals.

The first solidifies the fluid into a slippery block of ice that has the handy power of being able to stick to walls. The Cloud, meanwhile, has the obvious benefit of being airborne, but is also capable of whipping up a mean thunderstorm. Tasks range from extinguishing flaming houses to guiding goldfish back to their bowls, but while there's an element of fantastical whimsy to their presentation, they can usually be solved via common sense. Anyone with a basic grasp of science should be able to conquer them eventually, although the razor-sharp precision of the game's platforming elements may ensure that fewer make it to the end.

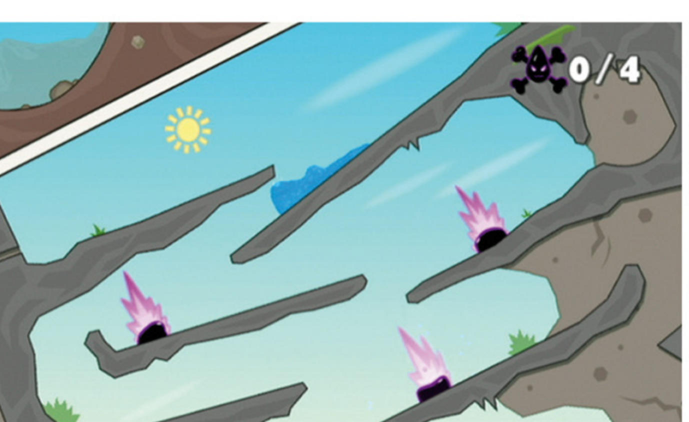


When you find enough of them, puzzle pieces (one is visible on the the far right side of the screen) unlock 'playrooms', but since they're surprisingly well-hidden, that's far easier said than done

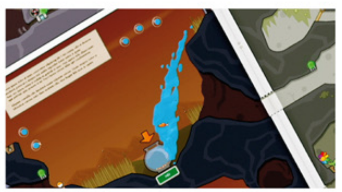
The reward for solving trials is always the same: a shiny, multicoloured Raindrop. These reveal new areas in each environment, just as Power Stars unlock planets in *Super Mario Galaxy*. It's a proven system, but being forcibly returned to the world map after successfully grabbing a Raindrop – or, worse, accidentally grabbing it again – is pointless and irritating, necessitating a bit too much backtracking for our liking. A system of warp points is unlocked before too long, but these don't appear as frequently as would be ideal.

While *Hydroventure* shares many of the long-standing criticisms of the *Metroid* series, it also shares most of its strengths. The world is similarly intricately designed, granting a sense of satisfaction and progress as you slowly tame it by mastering your many powers. It's a less iconic game by several shades, and while it may be difficult to identify with a semi-sentient body of water, it's just as difficult to complain when the physics that enable it are so gratifying.

With an unobtrusive art style marked by featureless inhabitants, *Hydroventure*'s visuals are reminiscent of the sort of science textbook illustrations and diagrams which every student will have enjoyed enhancing via rude doodles. However, aside from anything involving magnesium ribbon and a Bunsen burner, we're struggling to recall science ever being this much fun. **[8]**



The game's token enemies come in the form of the evil Goop Slugs, which are deadly when they're 'flaming on' like this. Hit them when they're passive, and your cleansing water will erase them from the world



The story has something to do with a malevolent influence infesting the world, but it's told with the lightest of touches. As might be obvious after playing *Metroid: Other M*, less is often more in this sort of game

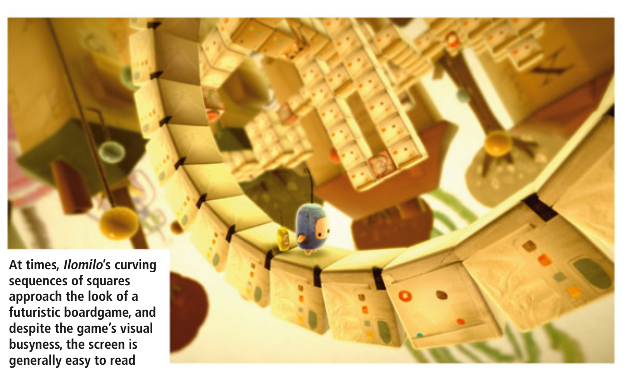






ILOMILO

FORMAT: 360 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER: SOUTHEND INTERACTIVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E216



At times, *Ilomilo*'s curving sequences of squares approach the look of a futuristic boardgame, and despite the game's visual busyness, the screen is generally easy to read

Ilomilo seeks to bludgeon you with whimsy, to smother you in a rich and cloying fug of patchwork worlds, squeezebox soundtracks, and loading screens plastered with folksy little scraps of poetic nonsense. At first it can feel like you've been thrust into a mobile phone advert from 2005. That said, while the game's twee stylings seem forced and the charm is a little too mannered to be truly effective, the presentation will soon fade into the background. Southend's spatial puzzler is clever enough to survive such a heavy-handed dose of focus-grouped fancy: you won't need to love it in order to appreciate some of its better tricks.

And so, beneath the floral wallpaper and jingle-jangle pickups, things are pleasantly austere. *Ilomilo*'s floating mazes see you switching between characters in order to reunite a wandering duo who initially seem terminally trapped on separate planes, and as the variables pile up, the game's levels begin to form a nice little laboratory for witty experiments with trap doors, springs, elevators and the odd roving platform disguised as a dog. Southend's better challenges feel like frantically over-engineered origami, and the very best require unravelling the puzzle from both ends simultaneously. By the time you're walking on walls, passing items between characters and zooming out to approach things from an entirely different perspective, the game's nimble complexity has achieved a little of the personality its overblown visuals so regularly lunge for.

Alongside bonus levels, collectables and leaderboards combine to provide width if not depth, each tugging the game in its own direction as you replay stages to root out a variety of tinkling treasures or to slice solutions down to the tightest sequence of moves, while crowd-sourced completion stats give you a sense of how you're competing against the rest of the mob. That, alongside a difficulty curve that comes with a few tantalising kinks in it, is just about enough to ensure that, while *Ilomilo*'s calculated oddness may ultimately fall flat, its most intelligent puzzles embrace three dimensions surprisingly well. **[6]**





If you lose your way, restarting is an easy business, but it's often best to simply scour the ground for visual clues instead



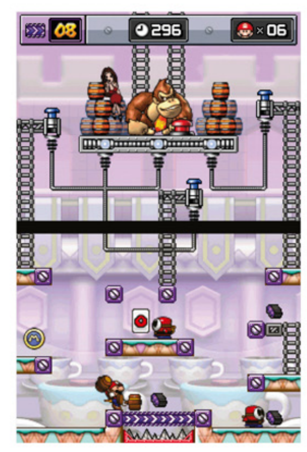
MARIO VS DONKEY KONG: MINILAND MAYHEM

FORMAT: DS RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

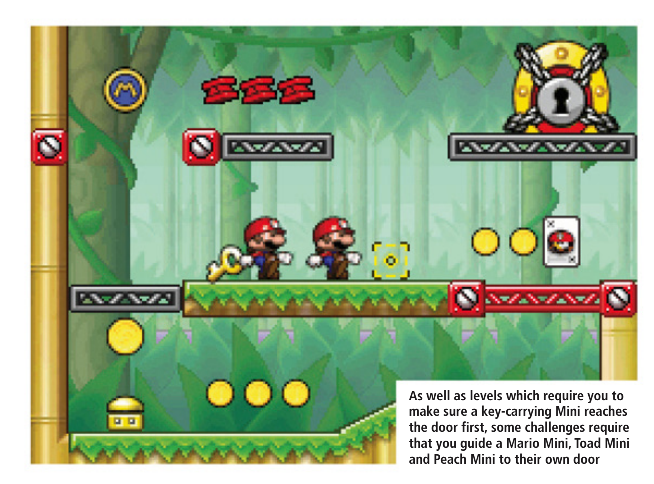
The evolution of the *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* games has been a protracted exercise in stripping away the player's direct control. Whereas the GBA original saw players controlling Mario himself, leading and protecting the Mario toys that must make it to each level's exit intact, its DS sequel kept the plumber offscreen, turning the toys into semi-autonomous devices players could tap on or off. *Miniland Mayhem* lets players decide when the Minis begin their march – but then restricts their control to desperate attempts to rejig the surrounding environment, *Lemmings*-style, before they bump into an enemy or stroll with a jaunty and suicidal insouciance straight into a pit.

Only certain parts of the environment are interactive. Initially, the player only has the power to fill in girders between fixed points – which, as needed, can take the form of bridges, slopes and walls. But, every few levels, the game introduces a new variable – spring pads, ladders, conveyer belts which propel Minis in the direction you swipe to build them, and even the classic Mario warp pipes – all of which players must fill in and switch out as the Minis stomp towards their objective. You'll usually begin a level with a plan, but swiftly resort to panicked improvisation when a Mini climbs back up a ladder you forgot to remove, separating itself from the pack. Bagging the trophies awarded for high scores will sometimes require you to divide up your clockwork charges deliberately, ensuring that all of a level's collectibles are picked up within a short enough time.

Controls can be fiddly – we've occasionally snatched a girder from beneath a Mini's feet accidentally – and there are times when you'll feel as though you've frantically chanced your way to a solution, but nonetheless, in taking away direct control *Miniland Mayhem* has intensified the appeal to players' protective instinct which exists at the heart of the series. **[7]**



Boss battles against DK are in homage to the original arcade game. Here, you swipe to create girders that will stop barrels hitting the Minis



As well as levels which require you to make sure a key-carrying Mini reaches the door first, some challenges require that you guide a Mario Mini, Toad Mini and Peach Mini to their own door


PlayStation 2
GUITAR HERO

TIME EXTEND



GUITAR HERO

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **REDOCTANE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2005**

How did Harmonix and its plastic guitar wow a global crowd when other rhythm-action games had only ever been cult hits?

G*uitar Hero* was not the first great rhythm game. It wasn't even Harmonix's first great rhythm game, or the first guitar-based rhythm game. But it was the first rhythm game to harness the transformative power of music in a way that everybody could understand. In its later iterations, *Guitar Hero* went on to make the previously Japanese-dominated domain of music gaming inseparable from western gaming tastes, and completely redefine gaming's relationship with the music industry.

In November 2005, however, it was just a brilliant but impractical rhythm-action game with an experimental peripheral, so weird that it struggled to find investors. Acclaim passed up on the opportunity to publish it – a decision that puts it almost on a par with the literary publishers that turned down Harry Potter – and it was only RedOctane's tenacious fundraising that made it possible at all. The concept of a rock rhythm game as a surprise success seems incongruous now, but *Guitar Hero* was born into the same obscurity as Harmonix's previous passion projects, *Frequency* and *Amplitude*. Why did this game – in theory just as niche – blow the world away?



Harmonix's mission has always been to bring the joy of making music to those who can't play instruments, and its games do this in different ways – *Rock Band* makes the fun communal, but *Guitar Hero* puts you centre stage

Guitar Hero has a closer relationship with Harmonix's earlier work than it first appears. Like *Frequency*, it translates music into patterns of coloured gems that speak directly to the reflexes. It plays the same tricks with your brain chemistry, channelling the human mind's love of pattern recognition into a single, focused task that makes it forget everything else around it but sequences of light and sound. *Guitar Hero*'s note charts are a language that every brain can learn to speak. Its divine inspiration – the idea that turned it from niche twitch-gaming thrill into universal living-room entertainment – was to marry that established, chemical rhythm-action kick with the primal emotional response of rock music.

In November 2005, Guitar Hero was just a brilliant but impractical rhythm-action game so weird that it struggled to find investors



Guitar Hero never fools the brain into thinking it's actually creating music in the same way as *Frequency* and *Amplitude* do; instead it's the illusion of giving a performance that brings the blood rushing to your head

The game taps into one of the most popular fantasies in the western world: what person growing up filling their ears with The Beatles or Queen or Metallica has never wished to be a rock star? Its tracklist doesn't just speak to a certain generation or taste, it speaks to anyone who has ever loved rock music in any form, from Black Sabbath to Sum 41. It encompasses such a broad and accessible range of music that practically anybody who plays it will already have emotional associations with at least a few of the songs but be completely unfamiliar with many of the others, turning its setlists into journeys of musical discovery as well as exhilarating reflex tests.

The essential element in *Guitar Hero*'s wish fulfilment, of course, is that Gibson SG-shaped three-quarter-sized guitar. By comparison,



BeatMania's turntable and keys and *Pop'n Music*'s primary-coloured bubble buttons are uncomfortably abstract. Images of guitar players are burned into the western world's pop-culture consciousness, and simply to see a *Guitar Hero* controller is to know how to play it.

Where the three-button *Guitar Freaks* controller's resemblance to an actual guitar is barely more than cosmetic, RedOctane's mini-SG is an artful simplification of the genuine article, just complicated enough to fool your brain and your hands into feeling like you're playing a real instrument. The ground-level skills of *Guitar Hero* are the ground-level skills of guitar-playing: the five buttons allow for power-chord shapes and fretting up and down the neck, and learning to fret with one hand while strumming with the other is the same hurdle of basic co-ordination that all amateur guitar players have to overcome.

It's not playing guitar, obviously, but it definitely is learning a skill. Working through the difficulty levels is a reasonable facsimile of learning a real instrument, as the full range of buttons and chords is gently introduced alongside techniques like hammer-ons, pull-offs and alternate strumming. *Guitar Hero* doesn't just create the illusion of playing a real guitar – it gives the satisfaction and sense of gradual improvement of learning a real instrument, albeit in a much less time-consuming form. Like real music students, *Guitar Hero* players are compelled to practise, to continue to climb the difficulty tiers and master previously impossible solos rather than laying down the hardware after a few renditions of a favourite song.

That peripheral also introduced an element of performance that no rhythm game had ever had before, its simple tilt-sensor realising a primal kind of joy. Thanks to the lessons handed down by rock's overlords through the years, falling to your knees and tilting the guitar vertically during the chorus of More Than A Feeling seems like the most natural action in the world, and the game rewards your showmanship with intense visual and aural feedback – the note chart fizzes with electricity, the score multiplier skyrockets, the virtual crowd roars in approval. The illusion of an audience adds even more of a thrill to pattern-matching – when you were hitting every sequence perfectly in *Amplitude*, who was there to cheer you on?

The custom hardware introduced an element of performance that no rhythm game had ever had before, its tilt-sensor realising a primal kind of joy

Along with the whammy bar, which furthers the illusion of playing a real instrument by letting you add your own flair to sustained notes, Star Power turned a natural human urge to leap and jump and swagger to loud music into a gameplay element, and turned rhythm-action into a spectacle.









Originally, Harmonix and RedOctane had planned for freestyle sections during songs in which players could improvise, but it proved too difficult to integrate into the control system. Instead, the whammy bar lets you add your own flair to sustains (or make the opening of Iron Man slightly less monotonous)

Star Power was also a crucial score mechanic, used either to double the multiplier or to haul you back from the brink of failure during near-impossible solos. Using it at the right point in the song became the key to astronomical high scores, making *Guitar Hero* as popular a score-chasing game as *Amplitude* and *Frequency* were. Spare a thought for ScoreHero, the community-run online scores database for the *Guitar Hero* series, which has been documenting players' most towering achievements ever since the original game's release with every bit as much dedication as the cataloguers of the, now sadly disbanded, FreQ community. Naturally this task has grown somewhat over the past five years – the site now covers 17 games, including the *Band Hero* and *DJ Hero* spinoffs.

Guitar Hero laid the foundations for music gaming's evolution into a social, group phenomenon. But it wasn't itself a party game, not yet, despite its competitive twoplayer mode. A performance was something to be witnessed and admired, not joined in with. The stage was yours; it wasn't shared with anyone else in a band. You were a rock god, constantly riding high on the crest of a song, adored, awe-inspiring, venerated. A guitar hero, you might say.

No developer lacking an intimate familiarity with rock music could have created such a heartfelt love letter to the genre. Harmonix's straightforward, earnest, yell-it-from-the-rooftops passion for the music screams into your face from every loading screen – to the point at which it actually overdoes it from time to time. The light narrative of a new band on tour that frames *Guitar Hero*'s setlists is clearly born of experience – the end-of-set scoresheet detailing the damage done to the venue, hotel and surroundings, the tongue-in-cheek loading messages and, of course, the extensive setlist of bonus songs by Harmonix's own real-life bands, which occasionally sound better than some of the covers.

All of *Guitar Hero*'s basic elements have been refined and improved over the past five years, but it's this amateurish but wildly infectious garage-band enthusiasm, this very personal passion, that polished modern music games have lost as they've gained licensed tracks and music industry credibility. If modern music games are real stadium-rock superstars, drowning in wealth and fans and production values, *Guitar Hero* was a show-stopping indie on its first tour out of high school – a little crude, but undeniably talented, and brimming with energy. *Rock Band 3* bursts with Harmonix's passion for music, but experience has tempered that loud, youthful exuberance.

Other rhythm games made you feel like a godly pattern-matcher, with reflexes so finely attuned to their intricate sequences that they felt hardwired into your brain. *Guitar Hero* still does that – it's a hardcore beatmatcher at heart – but it was the first rhythm game to make you feel like a brilliant musician, too. It's not just a music sim, or a guitar sim, but a performance sim; it's not just about the mechanical satisfaction of matching patterns and making music, but the showmanship, and the passion.



The singleplayer game worked so well in part because of its exactness: especially in harder difficulties, every mistake was your own. Multiplayer could be monstrously unfair, player one always seeming to get the best riffs



FIRE IT UP

Guitar Hero has been called one of the most culturally influential entertainment products of the early 21st century, contributing to a wider rock renaissance that has seen bands from indies to Aerosmith experience massive growth in their music's sales as a direct result of its inclusion in rhythm games. It's responsible for a power shift between the game and music industries – when *Guitar Hero* was being developed, acquiring master tracks to manipulate into note charts was both prohibitively expensive and logistically impossible, but now bands and their labels actively seek out inclusion in music games as a promotional tool.

Applause, too, for the team at WaveGroup Sound, unsung heroes of the *Guitar Hero* phenomenon who're responsible for the almost universally excellent covers on the tracklist.



THE MAKING OF…
THE X-FILES

Was HyperBole Studios' The X-Files just another licensed game, or the redemption of the troubled FMV cycle? The truth is out there

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, PS1** PUBLISHER: **FOX INTERACTIVE, ACTIVISION** DEVELOPER: **HYPERBOLE STUDIOS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1998**





4A/APT/CA49A INT NIGHT
Look at ties
4A/APT/CA49B INT NIGHT
Read journal

CANDY ACTIONS
4A/APT/CA50A INT NIGHT
Turn on computer
4A/APT/CA50B INT NIGHT
Use computer

CANDY ACTIONS
4A/APT/CA51 INT NIGHT
Check mail

Specific sounds
Door
Key
Mailbox
Unpacking
Computer
Phone
Making drink

Music
Selections played on stereo, if appropriate

Environment sounds
Apartment sounds

Intro text

Willmore must match the fingerprint image from the Tarakan against existing databases - revealing that Cook was aboard.

If the player goes home first he will find two messages on his answering machine, one from his ex-wife and one from John Amis at the local crime lab. Amis will inform him that he successfully isolated the fingerprint, but was unable to find a match. He suggests that Willmore run a search on his databases, saying that he has sent the digital image of the print to Willmore's e-mail address. If the player goes to the field office first, he will get the same message from Amis on his voice mail. Either way:

Willmore must retrieve the digital image which Amis has sent to him via e-mail. He must then run a search against all the databases to which he has access. Eventually, it will match with Cook's, but only after Willmore checks against the FBI Agent I.D. Database. This can happen either at home or at the field office.

Chained Dialogue

Actor Jordan Lee Williams stars as player character Special Agent Willmore. Botching his investigation can lead to many different deaths (top right). HyperBole's VirtualCinema game engine required logs of scenes, shots and gameplay elements (left)

Veteran game designer **Greg Roach** muses thoughtfully on the past. "There was a time," he tells us, "when 'interactive movie' wasn't a dirty word." Back in the 1990s, when CD-ROMs were cool and gamers were still being seduced by the siren call of full-motion video clips, Roach was one of the pioneers in his field. Called "the Steven Spielberg of multimedia," the Texan theatre director turned videogame designer believed that games could do something deeper than just "give someone sweaty palms or throw a bunch of silly-assed puzzles at them."

HyperBole had offices in Seattle. In the lobby stood a huge reproduction of Salvador Dali's canvas The Hallucinogenic Toreador. "It was the first thing you saw when you stepped off the elevator," says Roach, "and I'd often ask new hires to meditate on it." With its array of optical tricks, it was a fitting totem. Here was a videogame company that believed full-motion video (FMV) could make art.

But in videogames, much like cinema, art is often mediated by the demands of commerce. Traditionally it's a fight that leaves most creative talents feeling decidedly bruised. When *Quantum Gate*, an avant-garde interactive sci-fi movie, was first released, HyperBole's publisher Media Vision wasn't happy. "They said to us, literally: 'We want more guns and tits in the title'," Roach says.

Convinced that interactive cinema should privilege character and emotion over assault rifles, he despaired. He wanted to make movies you could live inside, worlds that wrapped around players' heads. So when Fox Interactive called looking for someone to make the first X-Files game, he jumped at the chance.

It's 1994 and Roach is sitting in a boardroom at Twentieth Century Fox with Chris Carter, creator of The X-Files. The cult TV show is only in its second series, but it's already snowballing into a phenomenon. FBI agents Mulder and Scully are becoming household names. Viewing figures are rocketing, and Fox Interactive wants a tie-in game.

Once again, not everyone is happy, least of all Carter. "In our first meeting, we sat down with Chris Carter, producer Frank Spotnitz and all the reps from Fox Interactive," Roach remembers. "The first words out of Chris's mouth were 'What can *you* do that I can't?' I thought, how the fuck do I answer this without totally blowing it?" After Roach explained that he wouldn't presume to write an X-Files TV episode, but that he did know how to craft an interactive experience, the atmosphere softened. Carter, intrigued by the potential of FMV, agreed to write a plot outline for the game.

Development took four years and $6m, a significant investment for Fox. What sold the publisher was HyperBole's proprietary VirtualCinema system. "It was primarily a media engine," explains **Jason VandenBerghe**, a programmer on *The X-Files Game*, "a set of scripting tools to let you do point-and-click adventure games, but with full rich media. It's like the Avid editor for games. You didn't have to be a programmer to use it because you could do all the gameplay logic inside the engine, assemble different types of media clips and have them play at different places."

UNITED STATES BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

ACCOUNTING AND TRAVEL SECTION
TRAVEL REQUISITION/SPECIAL AGENTS

ACCOUNT NAME	DATE
Mulder, Fox	3/29/96
Scully, Dana	3/29/96

AIRLINE TICKETING:
*NOTE: Agents will fly 'First Available' Coach Class to destination.
DEPART FROM: Dulles Airport, Washington, DC
ARRIVE AT: Seattle/Tacoma Airport, Seattle, WA

Shooting on film allowed Roach's team to employ a series of cinematic tricks. This shot of events taken from a CCTV camera was just one of the ways the game tapped into the same paranoid visual aesthetic as the TV series



Unlike many FMV games, which often used live action as nothing more than wallpaper backdrops, *The X Files* presented you with a universe to explore. It was a fully fledged world that felt like stepping into one of the TV show's episodes. Playing as FBI Agent Craig Willmore you're tasked with tracking down Mulder and Scully who've vanished, mid-case. Using stitched-together JPEG images, the game lets you explore locations *Myst*-style, but with more human protagonists to interact with.

"If traditional film is a river, the viewer of that film sits on the bank and watches the water flow by," says Roach. "We wanted to take that viewer and turn them into a fish and put them down into that river." A sense of agency was pivotal. Guiding Willmore through this rich media world, you can interrogate supporting characters and employ equipment from lock picks to a trusty Newton PDA. Find a document with a phone number on it and you can call it. Pull a gun on assistant director Skinner and he'll be spectacularly unimpressed.

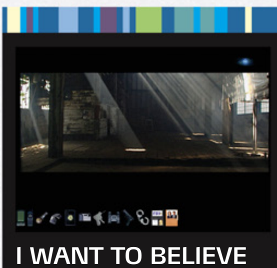
"The verbs in games are very, very basic, physical and crude," says Roach. "The agency in most realtime 3D games is expressed in your ability to shoot fucking anything that moves, or blow up a wall. It's a rare title even today where the agency is expressed along the arc of character development, or in verbs that are more focussed on emotional or dramatic actions rather than visceral physical run, jump, shoot forms of expression." The ambition of *The X-Files Game* was to change all that.

"If traditional film is a river, the viewer sits on the bank and watches the water flow by. We wanted to turn them into a fish"

In keeping with the fractious relationship between games and Hollywood, production on the title was gruelling. "Working with a company like Fox is a lot like talking to a person with multiple personality disorder or Alzheimer's," laughs the director. "They never remember from one minute to the next what they've agreed to. We had to deal with the legal division, marketing department, Fox Interactive, the TV division and Chris Carter. Each of them has their own fiefdom and their own veto capacity that only extends so far in certain areas." Unusually for a licensed FMV title, Roach was allowed to shoot the principal cast himself. Stars David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson were nabbed in between their work on The X-Files movie, although to begin with Fox execs were clearly uncomfortable about letting their talent interact with a non-Hollywood director. When shooting began, and with the budget ticking away at $5-$10K per minute, Fox's top brass showed up on set to cast a suspicious eye over the proceedings. "I remember that first day well," says Roach. "Fuck, it was hardcore."

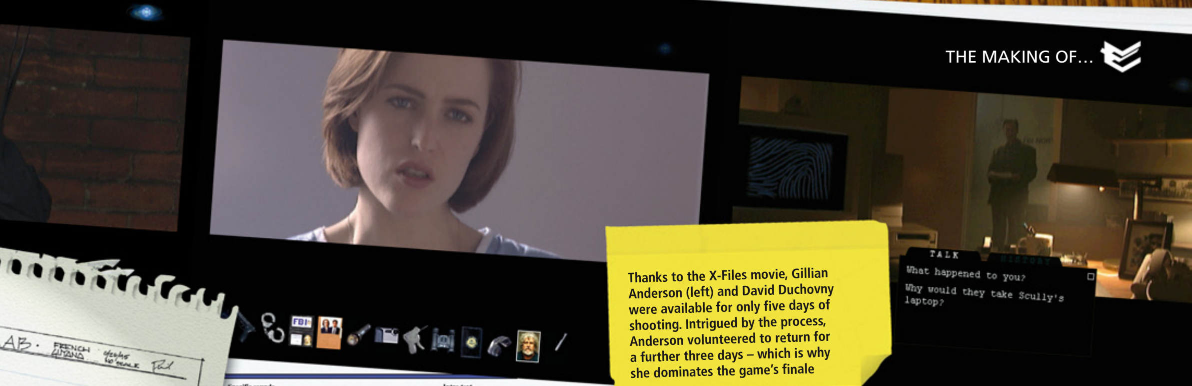
Such suspicions were endemic. VandenBerghe, who'd later work at EA on very different licensed movie games like *007: Everything Or Nothing* before moving onto Ubisoft's *Red Steel* and *Ghost Recon* franchises, reckons it was largely a result of the two industries' different attitudes.

"We don't share the same language," he argues. "Hollywood is a culture of personality where people with strong personalities can convince you they know what the fuck they're talking about even if they don't. The game industry sells systems; it's an engineering culture where you have to know what you're talking about. You can't be a bullshitter. Those two cultures are incompatible with one another, and unless you have someone who can bridge the gap, everything comes to a screeching halt. Greg was a natural bridge. I have never worked with a game developer who has quite such a strong vision or a capacity to communicate it."



I WANT TO BELIEVE

Hidden somewhere on the PC version's seven discs is an Easter egg created by Vandenberghe. "I don't think anyone has ever found it," he says. "We took photos of the entire HyperBole office and constructed it in VirtualCinema. You can walk around the office, go into Greg's room and there's a monster hidden in the bathroom." To crack the code, bring up the PDA's map and type 'The nature of infinity is paradox', without spaces. No one can remember, however, which disc holds the assets (number five, says Vandenberghe, while Roach reckons it's seven). We've tried without success, but we're assured that the truth is out there.



Thanks to the X-Files movie, Gillian Anderson (left) and David Duchovny were available for only five days of shooting. Intrigued by the process, Anderson volunteered to return for a further three days – which is why she dominates the game's finale

Specific sounds
Opening hatches
Sliding doors
Opening drawers

Music
Anticipating, accents on shadows and sphere

Environment sounds
Seagulls
Wind
(both muted when inside)

Intro text
Willmore investigates the mysterious deaths aboard the Tarakan.

Willmore and Astadourian look over the rest of the boat. They notice that the cabin has been dusted for fingerprints. Astadourian surmises this was done during the police investigation of the deaths. Willmore looks closer, and discovers something strange — fresh fingerprints on top of the dusted ones. (Growing Food) Willmore must arrange to have these analyzed — either by phone or in person at the crime lab.

Willmore must find a drawer in the Captain's quarters that contains what looks like a payroll log. The entries, listing names and figures in column form, are in Cyrillic. Willmore will have to have this document translated in order to discover a clue. Astadourian says there's a task force investigating Russian smuggling in the Seattle area, with a full-time translator at its disposal. She volunteers to take the document there to find out what it says. Willmore can accept her offer or take the log to Amis at the local crime lab for translation.

They also discover two interesting pieces of evidence. One is an odd storage box which contains a heavy lead sphere. The other is a set of empty crates with distinctive Cyrillic markings on the side.

When they're finished searching the Tarakan, MENDOZA, a policeman approaches Astadourian and says that he received a call from the County Coroner's Office. He's completing his autopsy on Wong — and has found something surprising. Depending upon earlier choices Astadourian might ask Willmore if he'd like to come along. If not, Willmore can invite himself or show up at the Coroner's later. Willmore is unable to tell her exactly what he expects that autopsy to reveal that would be of interest to him. She suspects that he knows more about this case than he's sharing with

3B/TARA/CHAIN 3*
Chained Dialogue: ASTADOURIAN 3GB1

WILLMORE: This looks interesting.

ASTADOURIAN: Looks like Cyrillic. Seattle PD has a task force investigating a smuggling ring out of the former Soviet Union. They've got a full-time translator assigned over there - I'll get it translated.

•WILLMORE OPTIONS:

1) Okay.
2) That's fine. I'm assuming you'll share.
3) Do you mind if I have the Bureau handle it?
4) I'll handle the translation.

IF CHOICE 1 - "Okay":

ASTADOURIAN: Well, that was easy. I thought you would certainly give me grief about that.

WILLMORE: No. If Seattle PD has the resources - let's take advantage of them.

ASTADOURIAN: Well, that's a commendable attitude.

IF CHOICE 2 - "That's fine. I'm assuming you'll share":

ASTADOURIAN: Of course I'll share. *(PAUSE)* Well, that was easy. I thought you would certainly give me grief about that.

WILLMORE: No. If Seattle PD has the resources - let's take advantage of them.

CRACKING CODE

Originally, the PS1 version was handled by subcontractors, but after nine months and much subterfuge, HyperBole realised their code was literally unusable. "It was the worst-case scenario," recalls VandenBerghe, who led the clean-up operation in which the PC team rewrote the PS1 version from scratch, against the clock. Fortunately, a video codec by programmer Nick Pelling saved the day. "He was a savant PS1 programmer who invented a method for data decompression that allowed that game to have superior video quality to anything that was *ever* done on the PS1." Incredibly, it shipped on time. "We did it and we walked out feeling like ninjas!"

While most FMV games failed because they were B-movies, with cheesy acting and low-budget production values, *The X-Files* was the genre's first true blockbuster – a Hollywood-quality production using the same assets as the show it was based on. Yet despite the budget and access, using digital video to build a game was still an awkward marriage, and several key problems became apparent.

Navigation through the environment's smaller spaces was a pain (as anyone who spent 20 minutes trying to get out of the FBI field office can attest to), and cinematographer John Joffin's decision to match the smoky aesthetic of the TV show caused a number of headaches.

"We called him the smoke Nazi," laughs Roach. "Problem is, when you have a camera three feet from an actor's face rather than 15 feet from a far wall, the smoke's a different proposition. We'd get the stuff back in post-production and we'd be like, 'Fuck, it looks like the building's on fire!'" De-smoking the environments in the game engine became a major enterprise.

But the real sticking point was the interactive drama itself. For all its incredible atmospheric and cinematic power, it still can't overcome the final hurdle of melding interactivity with the passivity demanded by scripted sequences. The fault isn't so much a failure of the designers as the limitations of FMV as a tool.

"Working on *The X-Files* proved to me that interactivity and drama directly oppose each other," VandenBerghe says. "Thus, interactive cinema is limited at best and doomed at worst. That was a devastating realisation. Drama is all about being a helpless witness to events. The moment you give the viewer agency, the emotional spectrum shifts from tension to curiosity. We could never get past that fundamental thing. Curiosity kills tension and you end up with a puzzle game with a rich, detailed background behind it."

Released in the summer of 1998, *The X-Files Game* sold in the region of a million copies. In part success was a case of enviable timing – the movie arrived in cinemas just a month later. But it was also proof of how well received it was among fans of the TV show, many of whom were non-gamers happy to ignore the compromises the immersive atmosphere demanded.

In retrospect, it's possible the entire FMV cycle largely missed its target market – non-gamers who like the familiarity of dealing with live-action scenes rather than hardcore gamers who demanded fast action and deep interactivity.

"I think *The X-Files Game* was the last hurrah for FMV," Roach muses philosophically. "I had a lot of people come to me and say that they felt like the concept had been acquitted by the title; they felt like this one knocked it out of the park and proved these weren't just harebrained ideas."

Certainly the game's feel was infinitely closer to the TV show than Black Ops' thirdperson follow-up *The X-Files: Resist Or Serve*. FMV's key selling point was its immersive photorealism, and *The X-Files* delivered that brilliantly. Today, Roach remains adamant that FMV is more than just a historical curio: "Everything old is new again. In the early '90s there was such a buzz around virtual reality. What's the buzz today? 3D. There's not a lot of difference between 3D, FMV and immersive VR. We're still chasing that idea of being able to truly live in the fantasy…"



Mitch Pileggi (right) reprised his role as gruff but dependable FBI assistant director Walter Skinner. Other guests familiar from the TV show include The Lone Gunmen, who hack Willmore's desktop webcam to offer a few conspiracy theory pointers

REGION SPECIFIC: SUSSEX, UK

From the battle of Hastings in 1066 to Quadrophenia, Sussex has a long and uniquely diverse cultural history. This is an area characterised by a welcoming, open-minded attitude, but one that is acutely proud of its heritage and distinction. The pervasive spirit of independence has led to an ambitious and successful videogame development scene, but one that seems fragmented when compared to other regions. There are very few egos here and studios keep their heads down, ploughing distinctive furrows all their own without the usual cross-pollination of companies in close proximity. Staff may flow between studios, but paths and ideas remain resolute.

The fact that videogame creators here are so assured in their ambitions has resulted in an outpouring of originality that is as surprising as it is varied. From The Creative Assembly's abiding focus on realtime strategy and Relentless' innovative successes in the social gaming space to Zoë Mode's explorations across a spread of themes, there is a rare single-mindedness here that transcends commercial concerns and champions creativity.

And that creativity is deeply ingrained in the region's DNA, from music and theatre to films and art, providing a rich source of inspiration to anyone living here. Brighton, after all, has its heritage in pleasure and entertainment – videogames are a natural fit. With easy links to London, but a less stressful pace of life and cheaper rent, Sussex makes sense for startups and veterans alike. Any lack of close-knit vibe among the community in the region is offset by its distinctive output, and while technology and ideas may not be frequently shared, the collective sense of pride most certainly is.

















A DAY BY THE C++

An independent spirit and diverse, original output characterise the historic English county of Sussex

Despite being just a short hop from London, the city of Brighton and Hove, along with the surrounding county of Sussex, has a laid-back character that couldn't be further from the bustle of England's capital. One of the largest in the UK, the historic county has remained mostly rural with few large settlements away from the coast, the many small, picturesque towns – seaside or otherwise – making this a popular destination for holidaying and retirement. But despite the slower pace of life here, the population is both strong willed and fiercely proud of its heritage. The county's motto, 'We wunt be druv' (or 'We won't be driven'), stands testament to its individuality.

But where towns like Bognor Regis, Rye and Horsham (voted, incidentally, one of the top ten places to live in the UK by a Channel 4 poll) provide quintessentially English idylls, Brighton remains a riot of colour and activity. A cultural hotspot and home to a large LGBT community, the city is famous for its vibrant nightlife and rebellious spirit. It is here, along with the city's two universities, that most of the region's game industry has gravitated.

In spite of the strong sense of kinship and familiarity exulted by residents and the developers we meet, there is a surprising lack of inter-studio communication. The creatives here seem bound by a characteristic idiosyncrasy to follow hard-driven but isolated paths. While there's general agreement that stronger business and artistic relationships would be desirable, the upshot of such compartmentalisation is a uniquely diverse region.

Brighton-based Relentless first made waves in 2005 when it released *Buzz! The Music Quiz*, a game which, along with *SingStar*, played a significant part in the transformation of Sony's PS2 from impersonal black monolith to social gaming phenomenon. More recently, it has twisted the formula again by creating *Blue Toad Murder Files*. Black Rock Studios, meanwhile, has blazed a trail for itself in the racing genre. Becoming Disney's first European studio in 2006, Black Rock has, in the *MotoGP* series and *Pure*, brought both motor and quad bikes to larger audiences, while *Split Second*'s pyrotechnics reinvigorated the humble car racer, too.

Similarly focused is The Creative Assembly. Based away from the sea, further north in Horsham, the longest established studio in Sussex has made realtime strategy entirely its own. The various flavours of the award-winning *Total War* series have consistently captured the imagination of armchair generals, and while the studio has only dabbled with console releases in the past, it is currently expanding to a second floor in order to house a large console team. Zoë Mode, another Brighton-based studio, went so far as to rename name itself after a fictional character who represents the sassy, mainstream audience the social-game specialist targets. Working closely with SCE London Studio on both *SingStar* and EyeToy, it's also produced original titles like musical puzzler *Chime* and innovative spatial puzzler *Crush*.

It's telling that NCsoft, the developer responsible for a litany of successful MMORPGs including *Lineage*, *Guild Wars* and *City Of Heroes*, based its European headquarters here, eschewing the perhaps more obvious choice of London. NCsoft head of community Loic Claveau tells us – during the group discussion over the page – that Brighton provides the perfect location in which to host international visitors. Indeed, all of the developers we talk to agree, pointing out that many previously short appointments quickly expand to become a day of promenading by the sea and eating fish and chips.

While it may be the focal point of Sussex, Brighton feels far from imposing. Its low-rise,



Images courtesy www.visitbrighton.com





decorative architecture and parks ensure the city rarely feels over-crowded or busy, while the pervasive smell of the sea and its associated eateries evoke memories of childhood holidaying. The nightlife here has a pull all of its own too, with a rich musical history and renowned clubbing scene that draws the nocturnal from around the world. Those looking for a more refined evening are well served by the city's many theatres – including the beautiful Theatre Royal, which was built in 1806. The Brighton Festival, held every May, has grown to become the second largest arts festival in the UK – after Edinburgh's – while, similarly, its Fringe Festival is second only to that most famous Scottish equivalent. The annual Gay Pride carnival, meanwhile, attracts thousands each year.

Such cultural variety pulls many to the region, but, we're told, very few have the desire to leave further down the line. "It's where we were; it's really as simple as that," says Zoë Mode's audio director, **Ciaran Walsh**, of the developer's formation. "We'd all been working in Brighton and we wanted to carry on working in Brighton." For the many students who flock here, both the University of Sussex and the University of Brighton offer game-related courses and, while local studios may not always have the time to engage directly with course leaders, the rich source of graduates fuels expanding developers with fresh talent.

But Brighton's game industry isn't only about developers. Vertical Slice is a company that specialises in providing feedback to studios on how their games play using a wide range of techniques. "We wanted to draw some of the expertise from where we came from, to make us different from any other company," company founder, and University of Sussex lecturer, **Graham McAllister** explains when asked if a service-based company might be better situated in London. "It made sense to be where all this knowledge was hanging around. We draw stuff from medicine, from psychology, from physiology – and from computer science, of course – so being around all these chaps helps us a lot."

A cultural hotspot, Brighton is famous for its vibrant nightlife and rebellious spirit. It is here that most of the region's game industry has gravitated

Outsourcing, too, is well catered for with companies such as Babel Media and FutureLab providing support and expertise to developers locally and further a field, while the BAFTA award-winning creative agency Littleloud specialises in digital animation for the film, broadcast and gaming industries.

Mention London, and gentle grumbling ensues. Like the companies we visited in Guildford, people here are at pains to point out the unique character and independence of the region. They wear their residency like a badge of honour, and where the aforementioned inter-studio communication may be wanting, everyone is united in their pride to be here. Well within London's wide-cast commuter belt, Sussex's residents have access to all of the Big Smoke's amenities while still enjoying significantly lower property prices and, of course, cleaner air. The bright-eyed spirit here is encapsulated by the pervading attitude that London is on *their* doorstep, not the other way around.



BRIGHTON ROCKS

Since The Creative Assembly is one of the biggest developers in Sussex, it seems fitting that it's hosting today's discussion in its busy Horsham premises. From the company are studio director **Tim Heaton**, creative director **Mike Simpson** and communications manager **Kieran Brigden**. They're joined by Zoë Mode's audio director **Ciaran Walsh**, NCsoft head of community **Loic Claveau**, Sussex University's computer science head, **Dr Paul Newbury**, Futurlab MD **James Marsden**, Vertical Slice founder **Graham McAllister** and Littleloud creative director **Darren Garrett**. They assemble to discuss living here, the difficulty of staying in touch, and open-minded attitudes.

What does Sussex have to offer?

James Marsden: A pebbly beach. [Laughter]

Mike Simpson: For us, it's that we are in that triangle of Guildford, London and Brighton. Our employees can all commute here and have a really nice set of options about where they're going to live. Then Horsham itself is kind of nice for bringing up children, settling down.

Loic Claveau: It has Brighton as well, which is very good for welcoming people – a lot of good places to go out and a good multicultural environment.

MS: Like London without the traffic.

LC: But the good thing is that you can mainly walk to your office.

MS: And Brighton's got a big multimedia community.

James Marsden: That's why I was brought to Brighton, actually. I moved here particularly because of the web community. There's a lot of discussion and regular meet-ups and things like that.

Darren Garrett: There are a lot of disciplines; it's like the UK's mini San Francisco, isn't it? It's attractive, it's got lots of hills and beaches…

DG: We definitely took a conscious decision to set up in Brighton. One, because we live there and two, we didn't actually want to go to London. So what we get is a lot of people who are moving out of London. They want a different kind of life – there's a guy



Brighton and the surrounding county of Sussex are home to a diverse and passionate game industry. We talk to some of the area's major players to find out what the region has to offer

working for us who's just come from Sony and he wanted to make a break from that London pace but still get interesting work. So I think it's an opportunity for people to get out of the Big Smoke, but remain close enough to it that you can get there. You can go up there and bail back out as quickly as possible. That's great for country bumpkins like me.

Ciaran Walsh: You have as good access to most parts of London as you do from other parts of London.

Kieran Brigden: The commute from northeast London to southwest takes more time than it takes [to go] from Victoria to Brighton. It's actually longer by about half an hour, which is unbelievable.

CW: I think in Brighton, and Sussex more widely, there's a lot of appeal for different people in different stages of their lives, which is great for recruitment, because you've got Brighton as a very vibrant young sort of place with a lot going on…

Tim Heaton: Then move out to Hove when you get the kids! [Laughter]

LC: For me, I've come from Paris – I'd been living over there all my life – and there's definitely a different pace here; it feels very civilised, you know? It's not London, but at the same time it has activities, and it's quiet in the day. Actually, compared to France, Brighton feels very safe. I don't know about other cities, because this is the only one I've ever lived in, in the UK.

TH: It feels smaller than it actually is, I think.

LC: Everyone knows each other, and so we've got a good spirit.

Does that translate into a strong development community in the region?

JM: I don't see a lot of that, actually.

CW: I think there's a fair amount of circulation of staff between studios for obvious reasons. If you want to move on from any of them, there are other options on your doorstep. I think that's a good appeal for people

coming in, as well – you're not going to some far-flung outpost of game development where the thing you're doing is the only thing in town. There are other options around.

Graham McAllister: We were wondering why the local IGDA [International Game Developers Association] chapter is pretty much dormant, so we took it over a few months back. We asked Jez Harris, who used to run it, and even then nothing happened. So we've been trying to do something about bringing Brighton developers together. If an IGDA Brighton chapter was coming back, what would you want to see? What's the point in meeting up? Would that be a good thing? Should we have a venue? As James was saying, there's tons of stuff for Flash developers or processor developers – anything but game development.

DG: Designers and animators – you've got those to cover as well.

GM: And user experience, you've got all this stuff.

CW: I guess because we don't do business directly with each other.

TH: There's nothing pulling us together to work as a team.

CW: Our business relationships are with publishers in this area and there isn't usually a lot of reason for, say, Zoë [Mode] and Relentless or other neighbours to hook up.

KB: Do you think that's symptomatic of the industry as a whole? I mean, there's a lot of talk about representation of the games industry in the UK – all the stuff about tax breaks and perhaps not having a clear enough voice and a big enough lobby. Do you think that's something that only we are guilty of? Just by nature of the fact that, like you say, we don't have any reason in B2B terms, to see each other? I'm just wondering, because we end up in a position where, you know, we all exist and we all do all these things and you guys are literally right next door to each other, and yet other than an occasion like this, you



JM: I was working in Brighton for five years before I learned that Relentless [Software] were right bang in the middle of town.

TH: We need something to get us out – get us to socialise.

GM: I'll make a point of sending an email around this afternoon, then.

Do you think that maybe the lack of community is down to the size of the area?

TH: I'm not sure, because I mean you guys are all in Brighton…

LC: Yeah, I think it's just lack of interaction. For us, for example, we are publishers, so we don't really have any interaction with any other studios, except for people who know each other. For example, I play football with some people from other studios that happen to be friends of friends, and that's how we come together. But other than that, on a professional level, except for the Brighton convention that might happen, stuff like that, there's no real connection between studios.

JM: There's no platform for it, is there? Other than the developer conference.

CW: There isn't formally, but I think informally, among the startups there absolutely is.

KB: How does that never reach the corporate level? It's interesting because everybody seems to know each other and they go and play football with these guys and those guys, then there's this gulf and, at the corporate level, we have this conference where everyone comes together once a year, shakes hands, exchanges business cards… That's fine, but that commonality between the whole working body just never gets any further.

wouldn't have much need to actually talk.

TH: It's hard to see, unless you're sharing work between you, what you'd really get out of that relationship other than knowing what's going on in the world. And we've always worked in a quite isolated way – games companies always have.

MS: From one point of view, the fewer of your staff outside the studio, the better. They'll move on. Early in our history, we wouldn't really want to encourage that.

TH: I think that's slipping away. We've grown up, and if we can't compete to keep staff – which I think we do pretty well – then we should just move on. Also, there aren't any regional boards; I mean, there's Yorkshire Forward, which was an interesting one for Sheffield and those development companies there that brought a lot of people together, and they sometimes worked together and would share stuff, or throw work at other people when they were overloaded, etc. That doesn't seem to have grown into anything stronger, and I don't get the impression that there's anything here in Sussex to do that.

JM: It could be that the development cycle is so long – maybe three years or so – that if there's something on a designer's mind, they can't talk about it. So they can't share anything that would be interesting. Whereas in the Flash community, you do a project every month.

DG: But also, just getting your name out there in terms of recruitment for people who are looking to move out of London or move to the region and don't really know what's happening in the area. Just a one-stop shop to find out what businesses are there.

TH: Yeah, to attract new talent in. And the universities are key to that, but if we speak as a voice through the universities, that seems like a great opportunity to get great graduates who might go and work at Google or Microsoft or whatever, rather than going: "Oh, games? Games are interesting." When I've been to talk at universities about doing a games degree, the buzz in the room just increases when you explain what you can do and the processes we go through. So it's about educating possible recruits, isn't it? We don't just want all of our staff to move around from company to company in the area. We want to bring those new superstars in.

DG: We should be advertising that this is a good place to work: "Look at all these companies – why are you working in London? Look at [Sussex] – it's bloody great."

Is there much direct recruitment from local unis?

Paul Newbury: Yeah, there's a reasonable amount. I don't know what the figures are off-hand, but I'd say about 30 per cent of our general computer science graduates go into the local community in terms of jobs. This is fairly anecdotal, because it's me keeping up to date with students, but we have a significant number of our students stay in Brighton, and I think Brighton in itself is really a sort of digital community. Brighton is also a really big draw for the students who come into our more applied degrees, so I think it works well for us in that respect, although we also battle with the fact that we're Sussex University and half the students know where Brighton is, but they haven't heard of Sussex. And it doesn't help that down the road we've got the University of Brighton in Sussex and we're the University of Sussex in Brighton. They also do a game degree. Of sorts. [Laughter]





"When I've been to talk at universities, the buzz in the room just increases when you explain what you can do in game development"

PN: I think even the simplest things have got a fairly large overhead attached to them. It's not until you get further down the line and get somebody who's been really good because they've done work experience that you're actually getting anything out of it. I mean work experience, generally, doesn't give the company a huge amount. The students get a lot out of it, get a lot of experience out of it, but I'm not sure that the company would because you're taking students who are maybe halfway through their degrees and don't necessarily have the relevant skills that you'd like them to have.
JM: We had one from City College and he's thinking of going to Sussex…
PN: Fantastic!
JM: We've got him writing PlayStation Home items, which we've asked him to do for one of our games. That's a fairly self-contained project. He's doing all of it and we're giving him a share of the money that it makes if they sell, so that's good for us because he asked if he could come along and we said yes. And he's obviously learning a lot.

Do developers get involved directly with the courses to make sure that students are graduating with the skills they need?
PN: Not at the moment. The game degree is only just into its second year. We did have quite a lot of input from NCsoft and some from Relentless when we were setting it up, but the real key problem for us as a provider is that we have significant restrictions on what we can do. So it's an integral process of trying to provide the courses that the industry wants, but it's not always clear to see what that is, because different studios want different things out of a degree. So we try to plough the middle ground with a lot of computer science theory in there, and game development and media on top of that. But one thing I hope to get out of today – and maybe from today onwards – is taking input, because we're on a yearly process of revising our degree to try and make it more of what companies want. But we only have a certain amount of staff and competencies in certain areas – it's the same for all universities, despite what some may say. We don't have millions of pounds to employ the people who are exactly the right people to teach those subjects, and [the degree is] a fundamental background to the area – it's not producing people with three years' experience in game development. If [people] want that, they have to do three years of game development.
CW: We've had, on an individual basis, quite a lot of contact with various educational institutions, but in a fairly ad-hoc way, because somebody contacted somebody. I've had discussions with a college in Worthing that specialises in music technology, and we've hired a lot of people for music projects coming from there because of a specific skillset. I know our art director talks to students and universities as much as he can, but that's kind of a difficult thing for us to organise – it's really down to individuals' time and desire to do it. [If] there's a burst of recruitment happening, then you'll see some activity, but it's difficult, from a developer side, to have any consistent programme around that.
TH: We had interns here from Imperial and that's been really positive. It was a good experiment for us and we'll expand that to other universities too, maybe. But it always feels like there's something better to do, and we almost need universities banging on our door going: "Come on, come on."
PN: The ideal thing we'd like to do is set up internship schemes or maybe work experience schemes, but you guys are very busy – particularly when you're coming up to deadline – and it's very tricky to set these things up. We've had lots of useful discussions with different companies, then are told "after this deadline" and things peter out. I must admit, that's significantly down to me and the department not pushing those things, but things can get quite hectic at universities as well as in the real world.
CW: It's amazing how hard it can be sometimes to make free work experience happen. Just because of the overheads and somebody's time to manage that and make sure that person's doing something that's useful for us and for them. It's about fitting those activities into the regular daily pressure. All of us, certainly, at Zoë think we ought to do it, that there are benefits to it, but the practice is often difficult.

CW: Three years ago or so, a guy was in for a few months in the summer and we gave him some prototyping work to do. It was outside a project; there was a concept that we didn't have the resources available to do anything with and I guess – like your example, James – we pretty much gave the thing to him and said: "What can you do with it?" And, of course, you get a fairly random set of results, but everything's a bonus and some of that work became *Chime*, which we released this year and has been a successful project for us. Part of its roots were somebody scrabbling around doing prototype work in work experience.
TH: You might randomly get lucky and get something, or you get involved with the university courses and projects, and you go after the best person on the course. That would probably be the way we'd want to look at it; to test the people while they're on the course and pull them in before they disappear.
DG: On the illustration course that Paul does, they do an hour's lecture about what we do as a company, but at the end of that also set a project. It's a great way for us to assess talent.
TH: Most of the people we take on are experienced in the industry, and where they're not, we always look for that extra work that they've done. A project or just something that they're doing at home. That's a differentiator, and the people who can self-start and do that deserve to be the first in the queue.
GM: It's good where they've tried students as well. I've got a masters student in Berlin who's doing usability-type work, but they'll get to see him for

two years; because he's part-time, they can try him out and see what his ideas are like. If he's good, maybe they'll keep him on. He's great, as it turns out!
TH: Maybe we're a bit different from other people, with a 90-man *Total War* team. They're specialists in their areas so we're usually looking for people who have come out of a computing course, an AI course, or on the art side rather than one of the more generic game courses. That's not to say we haven't employed anyone from them – we have, but it's not as clear.
MS: For our regular staff, we're looking more for talent rather than specific skills. In a graduate, you're looking for people who are going to be, in two or three years' time, a star. And I guess we need the games courses to attract that kind of person in.
PN: Yeah, I mean the feedback we commonly get is, "What we want is first-class computer science graduates; what we don't want necessarily want is generic game graduates." What we're trying



to do is produce first-class computer science graduates with a game flavour, so they understand the game pipeline and they understand the production of assets and they've got more of a holistic view of software, but for game development rather than just software development per se. It's tricky, and games are a huge area – you can't address every single job you could possibly have on a game.
TH: It is true, though, that people with a similar background can be ten times better depending on their capability. It's those bright self-starters that we're after. If they're on a game course, that's great, that's fine. Perhaps it's fair to say we find them more easily coming in the top tier of the older-style degree.
PN: The thing that companies say – irrespective of whether it's a game degree or not – is that having a relationship with the university means that you do get access to that top ten per cent. And it doesn't matter what university it is, there's always going to be a set of very, very bright people right at the top, and those are the people you're persuading to come and work for you rather than going and working for Sony or whatever.

Is there ever any sense that the community here in Brighton is in the shadow of London, which is home to a great number of top-tier employers?
JM: I mean, whenever I talk to people in London, I feel lucky!
TH: Paying those house prices and all the rest of it? No, I don't miss London at all.
MS: And we don't hear it, because we've moved out from London. If they want to live there, they can. We've got guys living there who come out every day. I've spent a long time with them working in the studios in London, and it's much more civilised out here. [Laughter]
JM: There's a sense of excellence in Brighton. People are proud of their achievements [here] and I don't think people necessarily think that London is a higher achievement.
CW: Game development isn't a London-centric business in the way that, say, TV or a lot of other media businesses are. There's stuff going on in London – if you look at music, everything's in London, and anything outside London is completely peripheral. That's not the case at all with game development. In fact, there's as much going on in this area as there is in London, pretty much.
TH: One of the reasons why Sony's London Studio set up there was because they're near post production, but in reality I don't think that has any benefit whatsoever. I always question why anyone would want to be in London as a games developer. As soon as you move out, you save money.
GM: Even for us as a service industry, there's been no down side to being in Brighton compared to London. Customers just choose who they think will do the work and if you're in Brighton, you're in Brighton. It hasn't hampered us in any way.
DG: Sometimes it looks good with clients – they're like: "Oh, you're in Brighton!" They come down for an hour's meeting, but spend the day. It's got a bit of a hook to it.
CW: Or if you're dealing with west coast US publishers, for example, all of the UK is just London anyway. [Laughter]
TH: We take a lot of Japanese and American visitors to the local pub for fish and chips and it gives them a real taste of England.
KB: The Germans really love it as well! One of the guys had a hard time getting his head around steak and ale pie: "Why do you do this?" You know, because it's nice!
MS: They'd better not complain about our food!
LC: Well, you don't have to go that far to find people who don't understand that. [Laughter]

Does being based here offer a lot of opportunities to interact with the industry worldwide, especially across the Channel into mainland Europe?
TH: We've got Gatwick near, we've got Heathrow not far, and most of our bosses, as well as most of the bosses for Sega West, are in west London. So it works great for us.
CW: In terms of recruitment, whether not being in London is a disincentive for people to work with us, I don't think so. I think there's possibly some people who would like to be in London more if they're coming from a different country, or even from a different region, just because London's London. But that's *at least* balanced out by people who can't afford to live in London, or who want to live somewhere that has more of a sense of community as well as the smaller town atmosphere that Brighton and other places in the region have.
LC: Gatwick's actually very popular for the European countries, and actually I think it's way better than when you go through London Heathrow, for example. It's such a big mess over there, but Gatwick is quite busy. It's very close to all of our places, 20 minutes from Brighton, so it's like heaven for us. And



"Sometimes it looks good with clients – they're like: 'Oh, you're in Brighton!' They come down for an hour's meeting, but spend the day"

especially because we have people from Europe, Germany, France and Italy, and Gatwick goes to all these places. So it's pretty good for us.

Brighton has a reputation for being open-minded and laid-back. Does that reflect at all in the working practices of developers here?

JM: I've got a potentially contentious theory on why Brighton's got a lot of nice people: it's to do with the gay community. It's like a protective bubble against all the people who are small-minded and don't want to move to a location with lots of gay people. And the liberation you can get in a small town where there's such a big community of lesbians and gays – that kind of liberated thinking perpetuates, and so you've got people who are happy and expressing themselves, and this, that, and the other.

CW: I guess there are chickens and eggs in that, aren't there? I guess communities like that grow up because a place feels like a safe place to be, but then it's self-perpetuating. Another thing about Brighton, and other bits of the region as well, is that they've kind of always been about pleasure and leisure and entertainment. And Brighton's got its very obvious heritage going back to the 18th century with that – Victorians came to Brighton for pleasure and to get away from things. The theatre has always been big, and the film industry in the UK has some of its roots in Brighton and even in Shoreham along the road. Those are sort of threads that go a lot further back than videogame development. But I'd say we're sort of part of the same continuum.

TH: It's interesting, because there used to be a big games development community in the north of England and everyone said that was because it rained all the time, so people stayed at home.

JM: Has the weather improved, then? [Laughter]

DG: One thing about Brighton and the area is that it is a very creative place, actually. As well as being all those other things, there's a lot of creative things going on, and creative people. So, as a bed of inspiration, things like the arts festival, it doesn't directly filter in, but there's that feeling in the community that there is creativity going on, and a few companies will recruit people to exhibit their artists' work. Relentless is talking about getting their artists' work on the wall and getting it out there. So we're actually keyed into the community as well, which is a really nice thing.

CW: I think that there's definitely a wider creative community that game development kind of sits amongst. I mean, I've been in the area for about 16 years or so. Fifteen years ago, I wasn't working in games, my background was music, and I rented an office in The Lanes in Brighton with a group of small companies – we each had a room in this little warren of offices. I was running a record label, and there was another record label in there, a graphic design company, a web development company, an events company; probably eight or so different groups in this one building. We were all young, and we were all doing creative things that overlapped in various ways. That was going on then, that's going on now, and some of those people are now involved in games. Some of them aren't, but a lot of them are involved in the media community in Brighton. So I think having that kind of culture going on means there's talent and creative energy feeding in to whatever's going on that's constantly being refreshed. And that's a good thing if you're looking for ideas and talent.

KB: As a result of that, a lot of first businesses – a lot of creative businesses – are started where [these creative people] graduate and there's a pool of people who have equal talent and passion. Certainly that's my experience: this guy's an artist, this guy's a musician – we're going to do something. I can find an artist, I can find a musician, or even events management. You've got a young culture to the place, which inculcates these little businesses where they start and they grow and succeed or fail and they bring people in. It continues in a cycle.

CW: And in a small enough place, those things kind of coalesce together as well. It's not all just needles in haystacks. You know, those people are kind of connected to each other. I mean, all of those people who I was talking about, one way or another, they're all connected to the universities and colleges with people coming out of those, or being friends with people who were.

KB: It attracts creative people. Creative people graduate, get to know other creative people and therefore the town and its academic mix help to sustain the whole thing.

Do you think that developers here might have more sensitivity towards lesbian and gay characters in games?

JM: That's an interesting question, but I don't have an answer!

DG: I think it certainly helps in terms of a project like *The Curfew* where you've got a gay character in it and you've got gay people who work for you. You've got them as a kind of opinion to say: "Is this feeling right to you?" You're not just saying: "I think that feels right." You've got people feeding in and so it feels like an authentic kind of character in there. And I think that's an important perspective to get when you are developing in that area. Maybe also because you've got gay people working for you, you feel safe doing that kind of thing – that you're not going to do something that's offensive or handle something in the wrong way. You've got someone to test things all the way along – does it *feel* right? For example, there's a bit with a kiss between two lesbian characters and our coder Amy was saying: "Does that look all right? It doesn't look like I'm being a bit saucy?" You don't want to be on the wrong side of that line. You want to feel like it's natural and right. That's just one example, but that kind of thing in the office, it can bring that to the project when you're handling those kinds of issues and going into those kinds of areas.

CW: I think that those issues are basically non-issues where we operate. Whether somebody's gay or straight or anything like that is completely irrelevant. And that probably isn't true in some other places, so there's definitely a difference here. I have more experience of the atmosphere in studios in, say, the west coast [US] than I do in other bits of the UK, but I think if you were gay, you would feel much less comfortable in that environment than you do in ours. Nobody could care less, and that's exactly how it should be. Obviously at Zoë, some of the kinds of games that we make are, in terms of culture, more female, less hardcore male and more in the spectrum that would include a gay audience – if there is such a thing. I think having a diverse group of people in the studio means that you've got that cultural awareness there and whether it's thinking about the kinds of music that different groups of people like, or the sort of cultural reference points that go along with different groups… We're certainly more sensitive to, and more able to understand, those cultural reference points than a studio that is exclusively a certain age group and white, heterosexual males.



THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

War may seem to be its entire focus, but it isn't the Horsham studio's only possible route to success

- **NAME:** Creative Assembly
- **LOCATION:** Horsham
- **FOUNDED:** 1987
- **EMPLOYEES:** 150
- **URL:** www.creative-assembly.co.uk
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Shogun: Total War, Medieval: Total War, Rome: Total War, Napoleon: Total War, Viking: Battle For Asgard, Spartan: Total Warrior*



The grand scale of the *Total War* games is part of the reason their attraction has endured for a decade



The Creative Assembly is very much the elder statesman of Sussex developers, having been in the business now for 23 years. As we're shown around the packed studio, though, lined with banks of high-end PCs crammed into every available space, it's hard to imagine that this is the same company that spent its formative years porting games such as Geoff Crammond's *Stunt Car Racer* and Psygnosis' *Shadow Of The Beast* to DOS. In fact, the studio's success can be traced back to 2000 when, after a period working with EA porting sports titles, it released *Shogun: Total War*. Seemingly overnight, it rewrote the rulebook for realtime tactical strategy games.

A floor-to-ceiling cabinet stuffed with awards for the *Total War* titles stands in the entrance, testifying to the series' enduring appeal. And its ongoing allure has allowed The Creative Assembly to become one of the most specialised developers in the industry today. If any other studio iterated a game so unwaveringly, you might accuse it of being blinkered. Yet Sega's acquisition of the company in 2005 allowed the studio opportunity to perfect its large-scale conflicts, and its few forays into the console space show the developer is still willing to take risks.

Now expanding to a second floor in its Horsham premises, nearly doubling in size, the developer is regrouping its console team to work concurrently with the market-leading PC team. The latter is currently busy with *Total War: Shogun 2*, having released *Napoleon: Total War* earlier this year. And although it may seem like the studio works to its own rhythm, irrespective of the pace of the rest of the industry, we discover that nothing could be further from the truth when we sit down to talk with studio director **Tim Heaton**. With social and mobile gaming avenues being assessed, and even home console peripherals Move and Kinect in The Creative Assembly's sights, it's clear that this isn't a studio that's prepared to rest on its laurels.







The studio is currently working on *Total War: Shogun 2*, set in the same Japanese warring states period as the first game



Home to the *Total War* series, The Creative Assembly's Horsham HQ lies about 20 miles from Brighton and 40 miles from the centre of London



Interview: Tim Heaton

Studio director

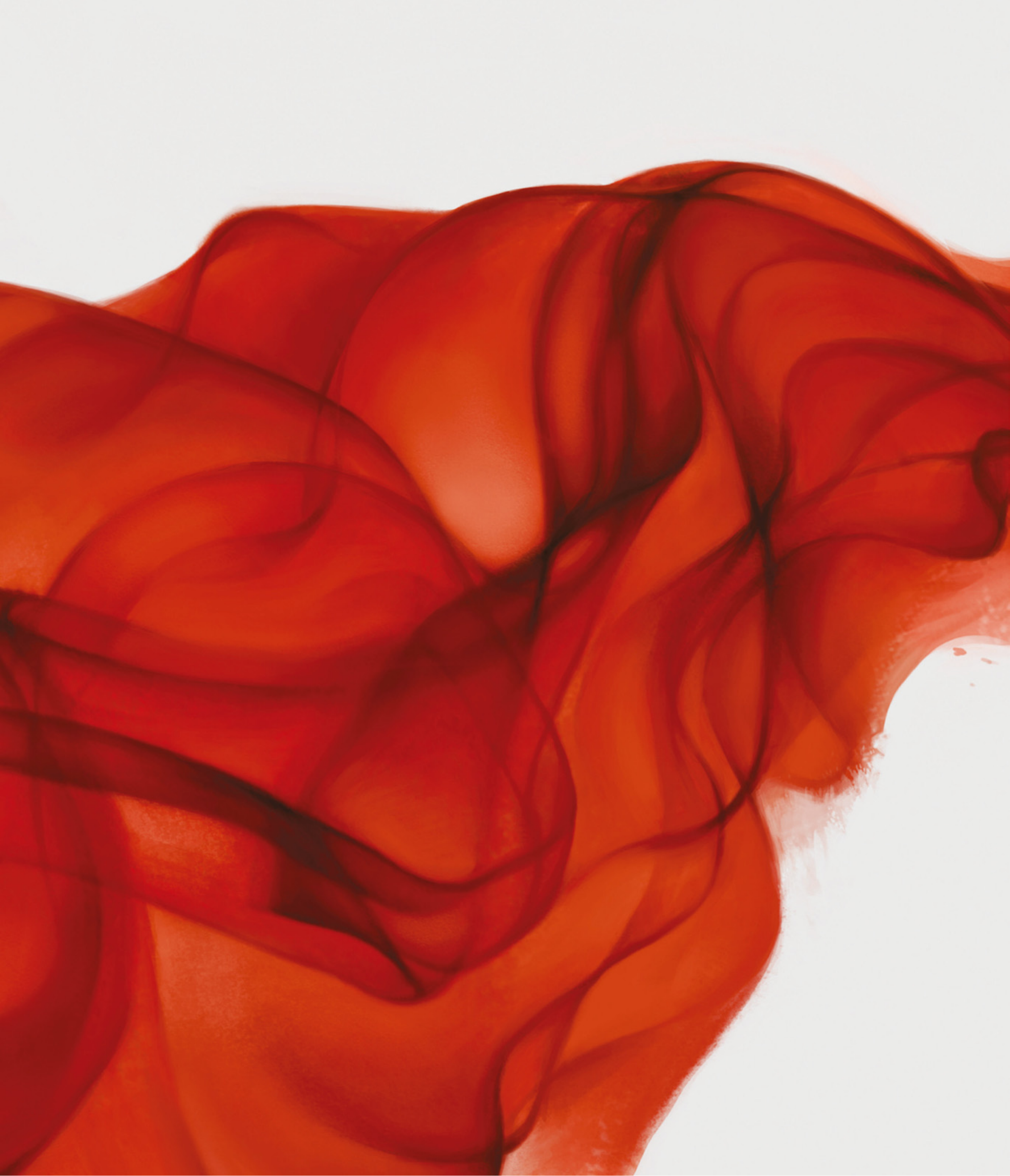
Why Horsham?
I think some of it's history, but actually we seem to be in the centre of the Guilford-London-Brighton triangle, which is perfect for us. We have some staff who live in Brighton and London and do the commute, but also as people are getting older and having families, they're moving to Horsham.

You're a highly specialised studio – is there any desire to expand into other genres?
We're happy with *Total War*, for sure – we have a clear road map and a strong team to support that, with plenty of people who were here from *Shogun 1* still making the game. And it's been very successful. But there's also the console team, who did *Viking: Battle For Asgard*. Over the past year and a half, we've looked really closely at that team, tried to define what their strengths are. We've managed to do that and we've been green-lit on a big new project for Sega that I can't say anything about for a year or so, but it's a big investment – it's a triple-A console title. It has nothing to do with *Total War* and it's something that we're really going to build upon. So, in a way, I think that the studio will become slightly schizophrenic.

Do you think The Creative Assembly would have been able to remain so focused without Sega?
No, I don't think we would have; they add a lot. We're fiercely independent and I think that's been key to the success of the relationship. It's interesting when you look at the mistakes EA made with some of the purchases of studios they made. Sega never tried to take control of the studio. It's a good, arm's-length relationship, and we see Sega maturing in a really great way for us.

What's the relationship like between the company's Sussex and Brisbane studios?
The Australian studio was obviously a spinoff of here, and they worked on *Medieval 2*, but over the years they've grown more and more distant – for geographic reasons, as much as anything else – so they're now completely separate. They do their own thing and we have no connection. We communicate, but there's no need for the sharing of any tech or people. We don't even share a huge amount of tech between the console team and the PC team, and possibly by pulling them apart, we're allowing them to become independent. Jeff, our audio director, is based in Brisbane, though. He works crazy hours – deliberately so that we can cross over time-wise. He has so much value that wherever he lived in the universe, we'd use him.

With Kinect and Move, could consoles now make more sense for RTS titles?
We're always thinking about it and we're always looking at competitive products and how that's working. Are we going to do something in the short term on console? Probably not, but we certainly haven't written it off. We did get excited when Kinect and Move were mooted, but I think the compromises that we would have to make for a real, full *Total War* experience mean that we couldn't match the two up for the moment. But we'll see.



NCSOFT

The Korean MMOG maestro has a base in the UK that extends its gaming lineage into Europe



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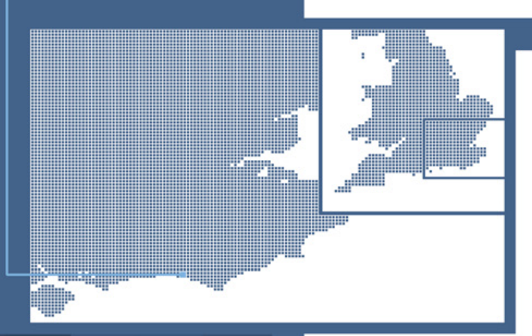
- **NAME:** NCsoft
- **LOCATION:** Brighton
- **FOUNDED:** 2005 (Brighton office)
- **EMPLOYEES:** 50
- **URL:** www.ncsoft.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Guild Wars*, *Lineage II*, *City Of Heroes*, *Aion*

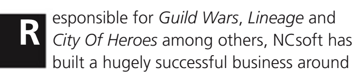







NCsoft's studio in Brighton houses publishing operations for the whole of Europe, complementing its Seoul HQ and US offices

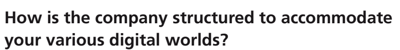




Interview: Véronique Lallier

MD, publishing Europe

Responsible for *Guild Wars*, *Lineage* and *City Of Heroes* among others, NCsoft has built a hugely successful business around the ever more risk-laden MMOG sector. NCsoft's Europe marketing manager, **Véronique Lallier**, tells us why its Brighton-based office provides the perfect staging ground for creating new worlds.



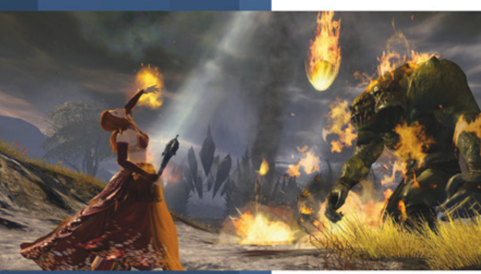
How is the company structured to accommodate your various digital worlds?
NCsoft West's European office, based in Brighton, houses NCsoft West's publishing operations for all of Europe. We work closely with the publishing operations teams for North America based in Seattle, as well as our corporate headquarters in Seoul. All three offices work in concert to provide consistent service across all of our MMORPG product lines. The infrastructure and investment needed to serve these varying markets with multiple digital worlds is a testament to NCsoft's commitment to being a global force in online entertainment. The Brighton office has a brand marketing team and a sales team, as well as corporate communications, customer service and community teams to ensure that our service across Europe is the best it can be, and in the languages it needs to be for our customers.

Given the sector's inherent risk, how do you approach the challenge of maintaining even one MMOG, let alone more?
Each product is different and appeals to a different type of player for different reasons, whether that's the genre, the play style or the business model. There's a lot of room for different types of MMORPGs. The key to decreasing risk is to have the infrastructure in place, which we do, and to stay on top of what is happening in the industry so that you can modify strategy to match the reality of the market. We've been successful in this so far and believe our approach as an MMOG company with a catalogue of games will translate to widening the customer base in the industry, not contracting it.

Free-to-play is becoming increasingly important, so does the subscription model have a future?
Absolutely. Frankly, we're thrilled to see others do similar things to what we've done in the past. The *Guild Wars* series is a perfect example – it became wildly successful but never took the place of titles like *Lineage II* and *City Of Heroes*, which were launched the year before and have their own loyal followings to this day. The MMOG industry is moving from niche to mass market and the free-to-play games are a part of what's making this happen. Eventually, as these new MMO gamers grow and want higher quality stories and worlds to explore, they'll try subscription-based MMOGs and MMORPGs as well as free-to-play.

***Guild Wars*' take on the subscription-free model proved an influential one; how can developers stay ahead of the curve in such a busy market?**
By watching what their players do and acting accordingly. This doesn't mean that they should quickly respond and put out broken systems in a rush – it means they should watch what users do, see the common thread, and engineer quality content that supports it.

What's next for NCsoft?
NCsoft will continue to grow its main franchises with quality content updates and gameplay enhancements, as well as ready games like *Guild Wars 2* for launch. We have a big year ahead of us in 2011 and I really encourage you to stay in touch as the events we are planning now unfold over the next year.





NCsoft's games, such as *Lineage II* (above), *Guild Wars 2* (top), *City Of Heroes* (right) and *Aion* (below), are played across the world, with a large Asian and European playerbase



Zoë Mode

ZOË MODE

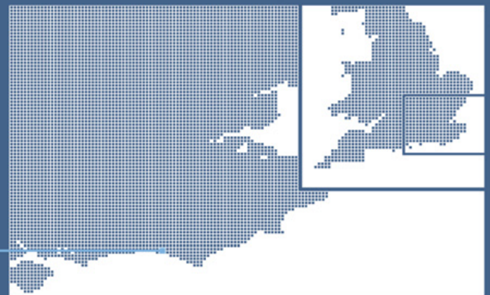
A Brighton studio specialising in musical and social gaming, and with a raft of projects in progress

- **NAME:** Zoë Mode
- **LOCATION:** Brighton
- **FOUNDED:** 2004 as Kuju Brighton; rebranded 2007
- **EMPLOYEES:** 80
- **URL:** www.zoemode.com
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Chime*, *Crush*, *Grease*, *Dancing With The Stars*





Zoë Mode's offices, which include high-end audio facilities, are located near Brighton's railway station



Interview: Ciaran Walsh

Audio director

Zoë Mode began life as Kuju Brighton, working on both *EyeToy: Play* and the *SingStar* series before rebranding itself in 2007 to better reflect the studio's philosophy of creating accessible, broadly appealing games. Split between Brighton and San Francisco, the development studio was the first company to release a game – its musical puzzler *Chime* – through not-for-profit publisher OneBigGame. Audio director **Ciaran Walsh** tells us why music and social gaming are both close to the studio's heart.

Do you think there's any ambiguity remaining in people's minds between the definition of social and casual gaming?
Absolutely. Social has become a term that means existing on social networks – Facebook, etc. That's certainly not the meaning we originally used that word for, which was about the social, in-the-room experience. Zoë games have always had that thread running through them, starting with the EyeToy games, *SingStar*, a lot of the things we've done since using cameras and music and so on – they're all about having a social experience in the room, playing with other people.

Is music is a natural partner for social gaming?
Yeah, because music is basically a social phenomenon and has been since the dawn of man. Music is a way people communicate; it's a way people bond and interact as groups, and that goes back millennia. I think music is an inherently social medium.

In an ever more connected world, what role can gaming play in socialisation?
That's a good question. Games can kind of become part of that general glue that binds people together in many forms of communication. People haven't stopped talking to other human beings because they do everything on Facebook; Facebook just adds a dimension, adds a channel for communication. Twitter adds a channel, and games add another channel. I think there's a massively diverse array of ways for people to communicate now. Games give you a channel, but they also give you a subject matter – competition and banter and those kinds of materials for communication – as well as the method to do it.

How do you feel about the current trend for integrating gaming into more prosaic areas of life?
I guess it really depends on what it is. I think making things into games is a way of making them more compelling than they were when they weren't games. Personally, a lot of that leaves me cold. Things like FourSquare – I really couldn't care less where people I know just checked in to. It doesn't intrude on my life in any way and people enjoy it, so great. Rationally, I can see the appeal and logic in it, that there becomes some overarching mission to things that are otherwise chores or that you're not otherwise going to bother doing. I can imagine it appealing to me, but it just doesn't [laughs].

What does the future hold for Zoë Mode?
We've got about six projects in development at the moment. We're making our first Kinect game at the moment with Nana On Sha – *Haunt* – and there's this whole baffling world of new forms of gaming and new platforms, and we're dipping our toes in that as well. We're certainly looking at things like smartphones and the web, and other ways of delivering things to people – other experiences and other business models. I'm involved personally in a new, music-related venture that's yet to be announced which is pretty interesting, too.

Zoë Mode's games include *Chime* (above), originally developed for the OneBigGame charity. The studio is also noted for its work on the *SingStar* franchise (below)



vertical slice
VIDEO GAMES RESEARCH

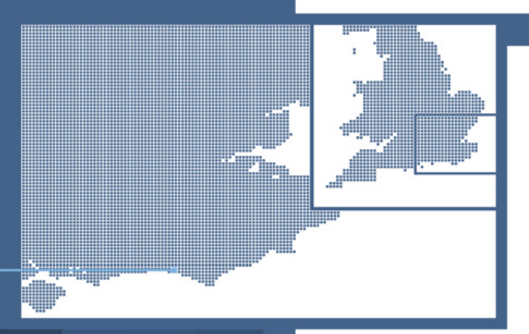
VERTICAL SLICE

Research into gaming that begins from a player's point of view



The Vertical Slice team (from left): biometrics researcher Pejman Mirza-Babei, community manager Joel Windels, director Dr Graham McAllister, playability researcher Gareth White

- **NAME:** Vertical Slice
- **LOCATION:** Brighton
- **FOUNDED:** 2008
- **EMPLOYEES:** 4
- **URL:** www.verticalslice.co.uk
- **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:** *Alien Vs Predator, Split Second, Blue Toad Murder Files*



Interview: Graham McAllister

Director

Vertical Slice specialises in helping developers discover what works and, perhaps more importantly, what doesn't work in their games. Sussex Uni lecturer **Graham McAllister**'s research into human-computer interaction formed the basis of the company, and now it services a diverse list of clients ranging from grassroots iPhone developers up to studios like Disney and Sega.

Why is your service valuable to developers?
If people don't get your game immediately, they're just going to move on to another one – especially on the iPhone, where there's so much choice. So it's important that the game's easy to get into and accessible, but holds you there. That's what we do, more or less – try to balance and understand what's in people's heads and get rid of the barriers that would make them think, 'I don't get it'. We knock those down, so that the original game design is left. The companies that we've helped the most have been the ones who've come to us earliest, so we get the chance to make recommendations that make the game better. Microsoft has a great attitude; they'd have a meeting about making a game, and the meeting wouldn't start unless the usability person was there. That doesn't happen in the UK a lot. It's bizarre.

What do you think of the claim that focus groups only serve to sanitise products?
Focus groups are not well-liked in any industry. They do have a place, but are very often used in the wrong place. Focus groups are great for brainstorming ideas at the start of a project, before you get anything written. They're not great for evaluating ideas. Developers should be as creative as they want. Go for the sky, because we'll give you the evidence of what does or doesn't work, or whether a game offers the right level of challenge or enjoyment. We're there to help game designers not to be sanitised.

Is there any danger of over-analysing the intangible themes of play and enjoyment?
My day job is trying to measure how people react. Rather than measuring gameplay, it's measuring the response to gameplay, trying to predict people's understanding – which we can do by using sensors and then interviewing them afterwards. If you interview people after they've played a game and ask them what they thought, they will forget 90 per cent of what happens. So the sensor will pinpoint all these moments where they experience something, whether it's really good or really bad. And we can play that back to them to get really detailed feedback. That's some of the stuff that we do that gets around these problems.

As gaming's definition broadens, are new metrics required to measure the quality of experience that a game can provide?
Jesse Shell, the famous game designer, would say that you shouldn't look at demographics, but psychographics instead. It's not just a case of, is this person casual or core? It's also, what does this person want from gameplay? Are they explorers or completers? It's much more subtle than people think, so we're trying to figure out why a game would appeal to this type of person and not the other. *Split Second* and *Blur* is a classic. They both came out within a week of each other, but they both appeal to different people. Why? They're both action racers, but people have a favourite. This is not demographic; this is psychographics. This is about how you feel, and all sorts of things about you. So we want to understand you more, and why you interact with that game.





Vertical Slice has offices at the Sussex Innovation Centre, on the University of Sussex campus about four miles east of Brighton

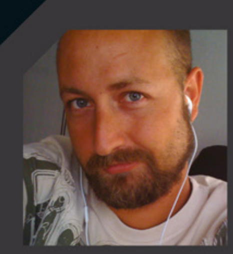
Codeshop

Tracking developments in development



Access all areas

With the future looking bleak for InstantAction's Torque engine, ShiVa3D 1.9 makes an attractive proposition for multiplatform development



Philip Belhassen, CEO, Stonetrip



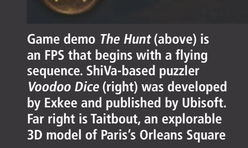
Remember when developing for consoles, browsers, handhelds and phones was considered a bit gratuitous? No, neither do we. As much as gamers nowadays expect rich, respectable titles on whichever platform is in front of them, be it iPhone, Android, DS or Xbox, they expect their brands to follow them. Hence *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero* (for XBLA), *Spore Islands* (Facebook), the World Of Warcraft Mobile Armory and the rather glam *Rage HD* (both for iPhone) to name but a few. Player loyalty isn't just earned any more, it's chased.

September's release of Unity 3 saw a key multiplatform development suite solidify that status with a powerful, sensibly priced update full of the latest tech. November saw another in Stonetrip's ShiVa3D 1.9, a release which coincided with the demise of Torque, InstantAction's family of game engines. Loyalties, once again, are up for grabs, which is why the price of ShiVa3D's Advanced licence (its premium product) is down to less than half the usual price. "We made [that] offer so that Torque users could make a quick decision to migrate without breaking the bank," confirms Stonetrip CEO **Philip Belhassen**. "And we will of course be supporting them through the learning process. If dedicated Torque-to-ShiVa3D documentation is needed, we'll provide it."

As titans like ShiVa3D, Unity3D and the UDK vie for the attention of devs who, in many cases, only have time for one toolset during their project, 'supplementary' materials like wikis and tutorials become anything but; along with licence types, trial limitations and of course price, they're deciding factors. ShiVa3D's documentation has thus far been the work of its 14-stong core team based at Sophia Antipolis, France, which strives to keep its work "as accessible and easily comprehensible as possible." Dedicated support staff, though, might be the only way to ensure a consistent and reasonable learning curve.

"A dedicated team can monitor any areas where developers need specific help," says Belhassen before promising that with ShiVa3D 2.0, a major release planned for late 2011 or early 2012, UI





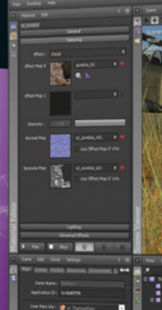




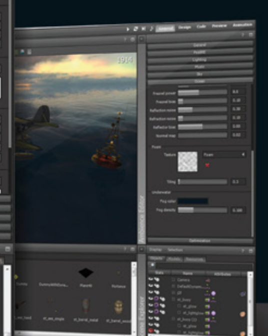
Game demo *The Hunt* (above) is an FPS that begins with a flying sequence. ShiVa-based puzzler *Voodoo Dice* (right) was developed by Exkee and published by Ubisoft. Far right is Taitbout, an explorable 3D model of Paris's Orleans Square

The recently retitled ShiVa3D packages now come in Basic, Advanced and Education flavours











user-friendliness will be a focus. "One thing we won't do is make radical changes: users who have familiarised themselves with the basics and workflow tell us they're really happy with it."

ShiVa3D isn't based on a traditional window and tool panels layout, but instead includes a collection of 'edition modules' that can "communicate and be arranged as desired," depending on the task at hand. It also provides virtual desktops inspired by Unix window managers, allowing users to switch entire layouts as and when the job requires it. "For a game programmer," says Belhassen, "the 'central view' will most of the time be the AI and script edition modules, while a level designer will never deal with scripting but will mainly need a big 3D view and a scene hierarchy view. Because of the modularity of the UI, everyone in a game studio can arrange the software in the way that they find most efficient."

ShiVa3D's userbase has risen by 12 per cent since March, more than 30,000 developers using it to create in excess of 8,000 applications and 300 games, including over 150 iPhone titles. New features of version 1.9 include the ability to code in C, C++, Cocoa and Objective-C; a unified authoring tool; point light shadow support; an unlimited count of shadow-casting lights; and the creation and deformation of mesh structure through an API which supports Lua and C++ code. Its marquee plugin support, meanwhile, includes addons like PhysX, Fmod and the Scaleform HUD engine.



Once under way, *The Hunt* is a rudimentary firstperson shooter with convincing visuals for a browser-based title, making use of a selection of effective postprocessing styles



"Our strategy at the beginning was to offer most of the common features needed to build a game, but the specific needs of our developers are growing along with the userbase," explains Belhassen. "To meet everyone's requirements, we need to support industry-standard engines and libraries – so five physics engines, four sound backends, etc. And some users had very specific needs, or wanted to reuse existing in-house libraries developed over the years. Plugins are an ideal solution to those issues, and provide even more advantages, such as developing the game logic entirely in C++."

The engine's support for Windows, Mac, Linux, Wii, iPhone, iPad, Palm and Android stems from a crossplatform ethos built into ShiVa3D from the start. "It's not an afterthought," insists Belhassen. "All system-dependent and time-critical parts are well identified and rewritten specifically for each platform, in order to provide a similar user experience and the best performances across all devices and operating systems. For instance, our graphic engine counts more than six dedicated backends, most of them being dynamically scalable depending on the underlying hardware."

As for ShiVa's 2.0 engine, it's a bit early to speculate. It will, promises Belhassen, be a "major upgrade" and a multiplatform (Windows, Mac and Linux) editing suite which builds on the concept of a modular, plugin-based UI. User feedback will inform many of the new upgrades and features, all within the parameters of "optimised workflow management."



Since March, ShiVa3D has been used to create more than 8,000 apps, including over 150 iPhone titles





A mini adventure

ShiVa3D received a welcome profile boost recently when *Crusade Of Destiny* (above), a fantasy RPG for HP webOS, won $50,000 in the HD Palm PDK Hot Apps Promotion. Developer Jopacus J Parrott, who besides having an entirely awesome name is an experienced artist, programmer and musician, spent seven months using Stonetrip's engine to make his quest- and class-based adventure a reality, and claims it took him two weeks to adjust to the tech. Awards were given to the most-installed free and biggest-earning paid apps on the PDK Hot Apps Leaderboard between July and September this year, though Parrott's game also appears on Android and iPhone. Afterwards, he praised ShiVa3D for its unified interface and the support he received from its staff.



BY CLINT HOCKING

SOMETHING FROM (CLICK) NOTHING Convergence culture

Part seven: Agency beyond the magic circle

For the past six months, I have been writing about ways to build connections between different games and, by extension, their audiences. I've imagined fashion design games for portable platforms that feed clothing designs to open-world games where avatar clothing customisation matters. I've imagined social world-building games whose player-authored environments become playable levels used in action adventure games.

I've imagined players of organisation-management games popping on to their mobile devices intermittently throughout the day to allocate resources and assign missions which are then subscribed to by real players playing action games. But all of these imaginary connections beg a fundamental and challenging question: if the interesting results of my decisions and choices are happening in someone else's game, why should I care?

> Leaving players to email each other about the wonderful things they've done is making it too hard, and we can do better

Agency is the ability of the player to take meaningful action in a game and to witness the results of his decisions and choices. I believe that agency is the very stuff of games. It is fundamentally tied to what games mean, to why we play them, and to why they matter to us as individual players and as participants in the human cultural landscape. Have I imagined my way into a future where games are all interconnected in such a way that the feedback (the 'witnessing the results' part) has been cordoned off from the players who need it in order to feel the agency that makes games matter?

The short answer is that I don't think so. On the contrary, I think that – done properly – we not only protect the traditional feelings of agency we appreciate (and depend upon), but we also generate feelings of agency in new ways and along new and different axes. To properly achieve this, there are three basic requirements for designing games that cross over and interconnect in the ways I have described.

First, the internal agency of each game must be protected. Players must still be able to see the results of their decisions and choices within their own game as a standalone experience. An example of a game that has done this poorly is *FarmVille*. When I give a gift to someone, the gift is always an abstract object. A separate screen that allows me to send a Red Christmas Tree to my nephew is totally meaningless. The gift costs me nothing, and the tree itself isn't even really a tree, but is instead a picture of the tree. The tree would be more meaningful to me if it appeared in my world and clicking on it gave me the option to gift it. Even better from an internal agency standpoint would be if I could click on anything on my farm and gift it directly. This would give me a more meaningful attachment to the objects I was gifting, even if the cost of gifting was still zero. This is not to dismiss some real design challenges that such a change brings, but the fact remains that gifting in *FarmVille* does not feel meaningful.

The second criterion is that of strong reporting. If I start to use a crafting mobile application to run a shop that is instanced in the open-world RPGs of my friends, I need more information than 'Joe bought a Diamond Pickaxe for 100 Gold'. I only feel the agency internal to my own game as it reports the results of my decision to sell a pickaxe. Better would be if I could fetch detailed reporting on what Joe does with my pickaxe. Better still would be if that information could be used to help me to improve my future crafting of pickaxes. This would not only enhance my feelings of agency in knowing how the pickaxe I crafted was meaningful, but the experience of having that agency would also be of benefit to me.

The third requirement is that we better facilitate player-to-player reporting. Many of my own greatest moments in gaming have been made even more wonderful and meaningful to me when relating them to friends. Today, the internet is overflowing with 30-second video clips of what are often spectacular and improbable moments. Leaving players to email each other about the wonderful things they've done with a gifted Red Christmas Tree or purchased Diamond Pickaxe is making it too hard, and we can do better.

A brute force approach to this would be to design your game to constantly record and overwrite the last 60 seconds of play, saving it aside on demand for editing or immediate upload and sharing. While certainly not something that would be trivial to implement, this approach could facilitate the kind of player-to-player sharing and communication crucial to ensuring that players are able to feel their agency across the boundaries between games. This makes agency a collaborative and social emotion capable of connecting diverse audiences across widely different games.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com



Illustration: www.marshdavies.com



Stylish designer clothing for gamers – inspired by the people, businesses and places of the gaming world.





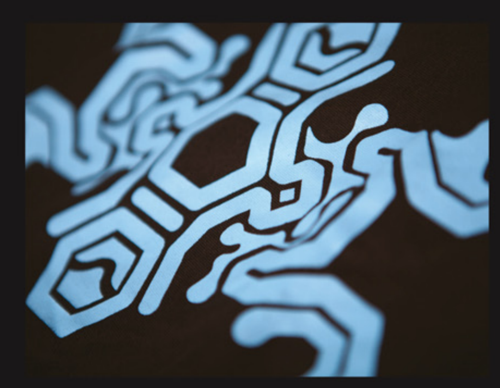














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HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Digging toward the core

BY RANDY SMITH

Looking beyond its maddening failure to support player choice, I was impressed by much of *Heavy Rain*'s sophistication. There are passages as fun as crawling across broken glass because, well, that's what they're about, which makes an entire series of my columns outdated, the ones about games being valuable and engaging without being fun. Similarly, I gave a GDC talk speculating about the psychology of compulsively saving and loading, and *Heavy Rain* demonstrates a tangible solution by keeping things sliding forward with a dramatic blend of failure and success the player feels no pressure to optimise. And here's one I hadn't thought about as much until recently: they offer numerous styles of interaction without overwhelming anybody. Transitioning from exploration into a dialogue tree or an action QTE isn't so unusual, but there is more exotic fare. Sometimes you can choose to tip back in a chair or lean on a wall, essentially improv acting your way through a scene, which is interesting because it's utterly unconnected to success or progress. There is also one bit where you walk through a train station frozen in time, and brushing against the statue-like pedestrians causes them to collapse. It's systemic but goalless, just an atmospheric, provocative experience to participate in.

Obviously, one of the most important questions when you start a game project is what the interaction will be. For our previous game, *Spider*, the seed was both concept and mechanic: you are a spider that spins webs to catch insects. Throughout all the refinement and embellishment, that remained the core gameplay. Our current project started similarly: you are climbing ever deeper into a dark cave. We eventually discovered that developers have created platformer movement already and that caves are kind of boring because they are made out of rocks and nothing happens. Well, actually, lots of amazing stuff happens in caves, and we envisioned an authentic survival game with striking psychological metaphors pertaining to isolation and claustrophobia, but it seemed unwise to require the iPhone demographic to share our patient fascination with nuance, assuming we could even capture it. So we conducted the disruptive thought experiment of reimagining our game in outer space, which gave the design far more breathing room to do cool stuff. Unfortunately, the seed of the game had become a concept in isolation from specific mechanics. It is a dangerous business to start with a concept and seek out gameplay. That's how we wind up with My Little Pony kart racers.

> "It is a dangerous business to start with a concept and seek out gameplay. That's how we wind up with My Little Pony kart racers"

But, feeling like capable designers, we prototyped our way toward a particular creative goal we hoped would be unique in the crowded sci-fi genre. Features and content began to weave together, but there were typical problems: compelling interactions with which the player had too little involvement; overly predictable tools that made simple tasks trivial and complicated tasks feel like chores. I began to reevaluate how to position our core gameplay. Dogma dictates that you get to your best stuff ASAP, but the more we worked to get this right, the more uneasy I felt. This is a game about an astronaut whose understanding of what he's discovered evolves as he continues exploring, so it would be appropriate for the actions and purposes to vary. From level to level the player might wander an area, struggle to survive, solve a puzzle, overcome an obstacle, or some hybrid. Ideally, we could even support goalless experiential interaction, like *Heavy Rain*'s train station. This approach would probably address the criticism of a game like *Spider* that you just do the same thing over and over.

We intended to use only a small set of player actions for clarity's sake, but from level to level how would the player know which goal to apply them to? *Heavy Rain* gets away with variety by displaying the buttons onscreen every time, but our hope is for something more immersive. We're considering leaning harder on a gameplay loop, a classic design tool that's been observable since at least *Pac-Man*. Loops are so prevalent in games that it's one of the most consistent design terms I've heard throughout the industry. Take *Spider*'s loop: eat enough insects to open the portal, then proceed to the next room. Even if a new insect's behaviour is novel and throws the player off balance, they at least know their objective is to catch them. This is a mid-level loop that provides clarity, structure and reward to fuel the less consistent low-level play.

To apply this without crushing variety, our ideal is a recurring mid-level goal that can be accomplished in numerous ways. Often we'll let the player express their own solution, sure, but the flexibility exists mainly so that we can create unexpected experiences that still have clear objectives and boundaries. Of course, it's risky to be public with an idea we haven't applied yet, since it might not ship. For that matter, we had better solve that postponed core gameplay problem if we want to ship a space cave game and not a kart racer!

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch



Illustration: www.marshdavies.com

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TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

That Mitchell and Wiebe look

BY STEVEN POOLE

It was when we had accomplished what the cartoon loading screen hinted at and yet the hordes just kept on coming that the terrifying revelation hit us: this is basically *Asteroids*, only with dead fascists instead of interstellar rocks. In a way, the old videogames were much more like real life: you can't win that either, you just hope to stave off death for a few more minutes or years. Disappointingly, real life doesn't often give you hyperspace or nukes.

Well, some of the old games were like that; others tempted the elite player actively to seek out death in the form of the uncompletable 'killscreens' that occurred in *Pac-Man* or *Donkey Kong* owing to the limitations of 8bit counters. I recently got round to watching the documentary King Of Kong, which is not only a devastating emotional drama about the epic contest between competitive old-school videogaming's

> Nowadays, a game is likely to give you a million points just for taking your clawlike hand off the joypad to wipe the drool from your mouth

Darth Vader (Billy Mitchell, stunted and twisted by having given in to the Dark Side) and its Luke Skywalker (Steve Wiebe, improbably fresh-faced, charming and normal), but also a fascinating reminder of just how different those arcade games of the late '70s and early '80s were from most of what we play today. Different not just stylistically, but philosophically.

Once upon a time, for a start, scores meant something. When the high-score table of the *Asteroids* machine at my local fish-and-chip shop had STV at number one, people looked at me in the street with a new kind of respect. (Or perhaps they were paedophiles, who knows? It was a more innocent age.) Later, scores were replaced by stories, and then pimping your unique avatar or upgraded weapon loadout across the internet. Sure, some games continued to keep score, but a period of rampant superinflation inevitably took the edge off. Nowadays, a scoring game is likely to give you a million points just for taking your clawlike hand off the joypad to wipe the drool from your mouth.

But the existence of a score implies the beautiful possibility of a maximum score, at least in a game that ends. There is something heroic, even superhuman, about the ambition that lurks implicitly beneath the high-score contest between Mitchell and Wiebe in the film: the more serious and transcendental desire not just to be better than anyone else, but to play 'the perfect game' of *Donkey Kong*. This dream – logically possible but practically unrealisable – recalls Nietzsche's startling idea of eternal recurrence. It holds that you will live exactly the same life as you are living now, moment to moment, an infinite number of times.

Sounds appalling? You're telling me. But Nietzsche's devilish twist is that we should decide to embrace this fact: we should actually want our lives to repeat indefinitely in exactly the same way, and glory in this as cosmic paradise. In principle, similarly, it is possible to play the perfect game of *Donkey Kong*, such that no higher score could be achieved, in which case one could reasonably will that each subsequent game played out in precisely the same way, undeviating and forever, and this – paradoxically for people brought up on contemporary gaming virtues of emergence and unpredictability – would be a kind of digital nirvana.

Is it even conceivable, by contrast, that one could play 'the perfect game' of a contemporary big-budget product? In theory you could sit there frowning in your pizza-stained smoking jacket and complete an entire FPS campaign using only headshots. If someone did that and made a video of it, I would certainly watch a few minutes. But even that couldn't really count as 'the perfect game' in the same way, given that (in the absence of scores) many choices are simply aesthetic – do you want to headshot those three guys, or instead shoot the explodey barrel to set them on fire, because you just love blowing stuff up? Remember, too, that *Donkey Kong* had digital inputs and relentless scripting. In our era of analogue joypads and more complex response to player action, it is impossible to play a game exactly the same way twice, because you cannot make the same inputs twice.

Perhaps, after all, it would be closer to the spirit of Nietzsche's injunction – to will the eternal recurrence of one's actual life – simply to be forced to watch forever a loop of one campaign-long FPS killcam, with all your banging into walls, misses, self-immolation via grenade and aimless whirling intact. But somehow it is harder to see this as a consummation devoutly to be wished. Modern games might be more like real life in this way, but does that make them better games? Perhaps not, but as I neglect the singleplayer campaign of *COD:BlOps* and lip-lickingly restart the co-op with my trusty comrade, I decide that there is also a lot to be said for what they never gave us in the 1980s: the awesome power to kill huge numbers of Nazi zombies in the three-dimensional face.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



Illustration: www.marshdavies.com

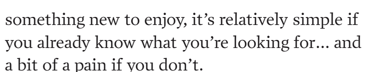
PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Drowning by numbers

BY N'GAI CROAL

Depending on your tastes, each of this generation's consoles has its strengths and weaknesses. But one flaw that they all share, even after a slew of firmware updates and user interface revisions, is the disease of more. As each system gets more content; as users download more media; as more gamers come together online and add more friends to their lists; as users themselves generate more of these various types of content and share it with the ever-expanding community, navigating the choices users have already made – and discovering new content that may be of interest – becomes increasingly difficult.

Think about it for a second. All of the demos and downloadable games you've acquired; music and photos you've ripped to your hard drive; the movies you've downloaded: the more of it there is, the harder it becomes for you to quickly and easily access it. And when you're trying to find something new to enjoy, it's relatively simple if you already know what you're looking for... and a bit of a pain if you don't.



> "How do we ensure we get exposed to a wider variety of content that we might enjoy in addition to the stuff we already like?"

This problem isn't unique to consoles, mind you. Whether it's a smartphone, a digital media player, a digital video recorder or a computer, the combination of increasing amounts of storage and an internet connection has led to a massive increase in the number of files on these devices. This has in turn caused the breakdown of the desktop/folder/file metaphor that we relied on for so many years. At a certain point – and that threshold varies from user to user – there are so many files on your device that it makes more sense to treat it like the internet and rely on the search metaphor instead.

What does this have to do with your console? Whether it's the Wii's channels, the 360's dashboard or the PS3's XMB, all three interfaces are essentially variations on the desktop/file/folder metaphor. So they suffer from the same content-overload problem as any other connected device. Search can help solve part of the problem, but the advantage that smartphones and computers have over consoles is the inclusion of keyboards, which makes entering search terms easier than it would be on a console. Predictive typing, as on the PS3, partially alleviates this issue. More interesting to me is the potential for speaker-independent voice command – using headsets and/or the built-in microphones in Kinect or the PlayStation Eye – along with robust global search to make locating content much easier.

While improved search is key to content navigation, it's only part of the solution when it comes to content discovery. Consider how you find out about a new game that you want to play: you may read about it in **Edge**, see an ad on TV, download a demo, or discuss it with your friends. But what about a game that you *don't* know that you want to play... but that you might enjoy anyway? Or new, user-created content? Or a song that was released a year ago?

Search is great when we have an idea of what we're looking for – but we don't only like the things that we're looking for. The truth is that there's no one solution to solve the serendipity problem: how do we ensure that we get exposed to a wider variety of content that we might enjoy in addition to the stuff that we're pretty sure will scratch the itches we already know that we possess? It's great that we can see what our friends are playing, but if your friends are anything like mine, they're playing the stuff that's popular and therefore a known quantity.

When I think about how I discover other types of media, from new songs to YouTube videos, I come across them in a variety of ways: email, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, text messages, recommendation engines and even purpose-built apps like Pandora and Aweditorium. Pandora is interesting because it's based around the concept of 'music genomes', that by analysing a variety of attributes that a song has – from melody and rhythm to lyrics, vocals and more – the service can determine an array of songs that you may like based on an artist or a song that you already like. And the more you tell it whether you like the songs it's playing for you, the better it gets at predicting others.

Aweditorium, on the other hand, is based around a curatorial model. You're presented with a grid of photographs, a mini-map and a glowing rectangle with a single word: 'Tap'. By tapping on any of the photos on the grid, a song by the artist in the photo starts playing. Lyrics appear at the bottom of the screen. Word bubbles appear, revealing more information. Aweditorium is equal parts record store, album cover, listening booth, karaoke machine and MTV pop-up video – and as a music discovery experience, it's unlike anything I've seen before.

Games aren't music, and music isn't games. But services like Pandora and Aweditorium demonstrate how much further discovery has to go on games consoles. We may not get there this generation, but with all signs pointing to a longer-than-expected wait for new machines, we can only hope the platform manufacturers come up with a solution to the disease of more before the next arms race begins.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com

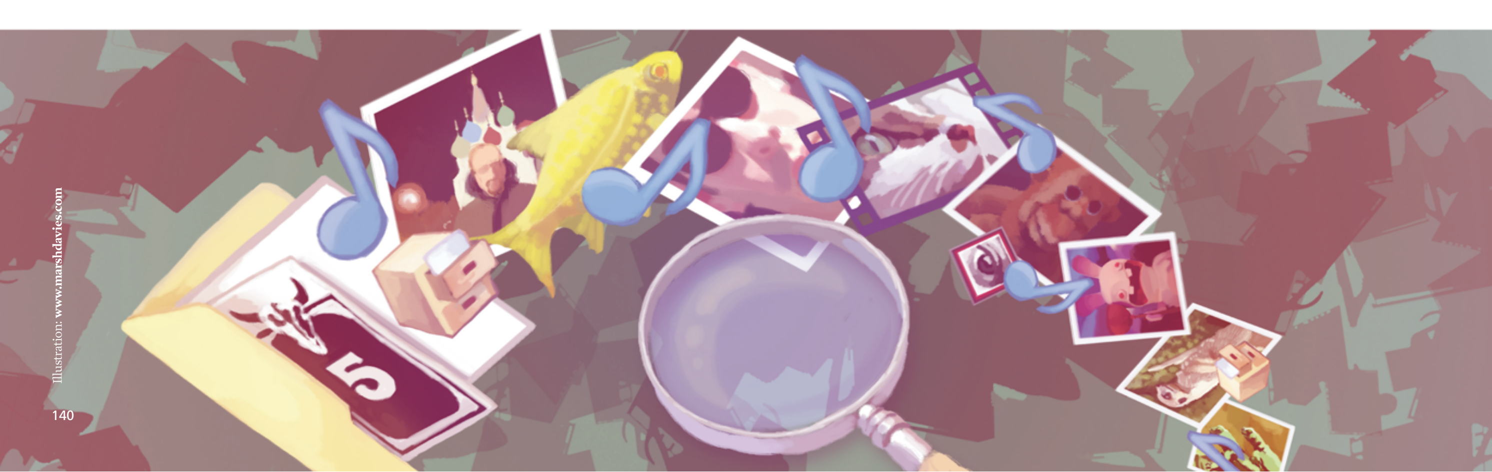


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Issue 222



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum
forums.next-gen.biz

Topic: Uncharted to get film treatment

So... will this suck? Probably. All they need to do is play the game, write screen directions for all the action, copy the dialogue and it'll be fine.
MattyJ

Hardest thing will be to create a convincing 'half-tuck' costume.
regmcfly

Get the woman who plays Elena to play Elena – she looks like her and the voice is strangely identical.
adored

I'd like for Naughty Dog to give the next (if there is one) *Uncharted* the film treatment using the game engine. The extras on the original disc showed other devs how it should be done. I can't remember the last game I had where the extras were actually interesting.
PermiaN

I'm really, really looking forward to not watching it.
Dark Soldier

The loneliness of working solo or in small teams must be sinking into the bones of indie developers. From Jonathan Blow's *Braid* and ThatGameCompany's *Flower*, to PlayDead's *Limbo*, small studios are getting increasingly introspective. Even *Flotilla*'s surreal, humorous narration is drowned out by the sad beauty of achingly slow missiles finding their quarry against a backdrop of classical music and the cold, infinite emptiness of space. And, for the most part, it's great – these games manage to evince feelings rarely felt in mainstream titles outside of Fumito Ueda's work.

But increasingly, it seems that such melancholy is becoming one of the checklist items to be ticked off, just between 'Fun to play' and 'Doesn't crash'. My case in point is *Ilomilo*, a deliriously cute puzzler on XBLA that, while offering little that's revolutionary, still manages to captivate my girlfriend and I in multiplayer. The core idea of two friends looking to meet up but separated by obstacles is appealing (and reminds me of *Mr & Mrs* way back in my Amiga years), while the playful use of space sets up some interesting, if not hugely challenging, puzzles.

But despite the game being built around such a happy occasion as spending time with a loved one, the developer has found it necessary to include some of that all-important extraneous melancholy, which here takes the form of a bittersweet backstory relayed through gradually collected, longingly written letters. There's nothing wrong with them per se, but it's difficult not to feel a little numb when presented with yet another indie game that wants you to think about a 'big issue'. Perhaps *Ilomilo* is simply a victim of the proliferation of sadness and sixth-form philosophy in these intimate titles but, like lens flare and bloom, indie melancholy is fast becoming a cliché, and as a result it's rapidly losing its impact.
Richard Avery

The indie community's melancholic streak is no doubt a response to mainstream games' fascination with glitz, guns and gore. As for antidotes, how about *Super Meat Boy*'s sense of humour or *Minecraft*'s pioneer spirit?

Perhaps Ilomilo is a victim of the proliferation of sadness and sixth-form philosophy. Like lens flare, indie melancholy is fast becoming a cliché

As a lecturer in politics undertaking research into military games, I found your article War Porn [**E**222] to be illuminating, but felt that it was under-developed in one crucial respect. In particular, we need to ask questions as to how the proliferation of military games affects the player citizen, and how the militarisation of games spills over into popular interpretations of the actualities of war. Two themes illustrate the importance of such questions.

The first relates to the implications of what is described as 'Orientalism', namely the Middle East being depicted as backward, violent and resistant to civil order. Games in which the streets are devoid of citizens going about their legitimate business reinforce this viewpoint, suggesting that the Middle East is an empty backdrop for western military activity; in these games, such societies are also represented as bereft of domestic law-enforcement agencies such that the only solution is foreign military action, not only to liberate but also to restore a sense of legal order.



Letter of the month wins a DSi XL

The second relates to a more subtle form of representation, perhaps most clearly encapsulated by EA's *Army Of Two*, which casts the player as a mercenary engaged in a number of contemporary conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. The game's narrative constructs an alternative, convincing version of history for its players in which weapons of mass destruction existed in both Afghanistan and Iraq and in which Bin Laden (or his equivalent) actually did have a highly organised network, with sophisticated command structures and extensive military facilities. The game, therefore, reiterates and confirms the position taken by many American media outlets at the time of the 9/11 attacks, even though these 'facts' have subsequently been called into question.

This game is typical of many military combat games, not only in its depiction of scenarios which we now know to be untrue but also in its portrayal of the view that the only solution to the political problems in states such as Afghanistan and Iraq is

through the use of force: the war on terror is only to be won by indiscriminate killing.

The implications of such attitudes are potentially alarming. Recent research suggests such representations may serve not only to add allure to the military but more importantly to reinforce a sense of citizens being acquiescent parties in the militarisation of society, becoming what [author of Militainment, Inc] Roger Stahl has termed 'virtual citizen soldiers' and losing their fundamental function as citizens, which is to question and challenge the actions of government.

If this is true, then it is a serious problem made more acute not only by the proliferation of military games, but also the way in which they are frequently played by schoolchildren whose parents purchase them ignorant of, and unswayed by, age ratings. With this in mind, it seems to me that there is a pressing need for military games which allow a space for contemplation of what are in fact quite complex issues, in order to allow us, as gamers and citizens, to critically reflect on the ethical dimensions of war.
Nick Robinson

The issues involved in depicting a foreign region and its culture is surely intimidating to many developers, who fall back on the unspecified nature of a generic Middle Eastern setting when tackling contemporary conflict. Our interview with Sion Lenton, creative director of *Operation Flashpoint: Red River*, on p12 touches on some of the issues you've discussed. We hope there's nothing too objectionable in the handling of political and military issues in the games on your new DSi XL.

Have we run out of interesting wars? Watching the news reports and documentary footage sent back from Iraq and Afghanistan reinforces the idiom that 90 per cent of war is killing time, while ten per cent is the killing time, and this was something not addressed in your otherwise very interesting War Porn feature [**E**222]. Of course war games and war movies concentrate on the heart-pounding moments, but we can see from the news that this isn't what war is like most of the time.

War games and war movies concentrate on heart-pounding moments, but we can see from the news that this isn't what war is like most of the time

I read with interest posts on the **Edge** forum from a serving RAF officer describing US troops playing volleyball and giving guided tours of a gunship. But would *Call Of Duty: Falklands* (your squad reaches Port Stanley to find that Max Hastings has got there before you and is in the pub) or *Medal Of Honor: Peacekeeping* be popular? Probably not. The point of your War Porn feature remains true, that war is glamorised in games, but this is tempered by the fact that no one would buy the games if it wasn't.
Martin Payne



Martin Payne suggests that war games like *Medal Of Honor* wouldn't sell if they didn't glamorise conflict



Topic: My Game High Concept

This is my high concept. Do you think it would get anyone like Nintendo, Media Molecule or Team 17 interested? Any comments?

'Venture into the Candy Cosmos with Pic 'n' Mix as you explore new galaxies, planets and confectionery to whirl through obstacles. Run, fly, drive, sail, bounce, morph and roll through the hyper hues of the swordls. Caning the galactic floaters and bosses will provide you with new special sweet abilities to explore the entire megacosm.'
Ninthrowfrog

Tell me more about the galactic floaters.
Mod74

It's almost impossible to evaluate a game concept through words alone. In fact, from your description I can't even work out what sort of game this might be. Best of luck, though.
Yossarian

It would be *Zool*.
djchump

Did *Zool* include galactic floaters?
Sasukekun

Sounds like *Mario Galaxy* with sweets.
Cobra N

I hear this is just the sort of game concept they go for in the Gibraltar game dev scene.
Dr Gonzo

The name of this game is *Pic 'n' Mix*. The genre is *platforming*.
Ninthrowfrog

How about *Pick 'n' Micks*? You play a navvie looking for work in the '70s who is secretly an IRA bomber. The genre is *racism*.
Mod74

Thanks for your ideas.
Ninthrowfrog

Regarding Randy Smith's search for meaning in games [**E**221], meaning is the product of a combination of coherence and intent. In a film, the product is passively observed and internally analysed. When reading, the product is actively read and internally analysed. In both cases, the timeframe in which the recipient has to reflect on meaning is as infinite as the person is patient. Meaning in these mediums tends to be realised after the interface with that medium has taken place. In a game, you actively input a command and then passively observe the result. There is not much time for reflection as the next input/observe sequence happens again. Gameplay only becomes meaningful when the active and passive bounce back and forth inconspicuously. In other words, when what the player intends and what happens as a result are ostensibly linked, you have satisfying gameplay. Or meaning, as it relates to this discussion.

On one end you have 'interactive movies', on the other you have text-heavy RPGs with a one-button attack control scheme. One is more like movies, the other more like books. Both can be successful, but neither fully exploits the unique advantage of interactivity that games have. Everybody says gameplay is king, then immediately participate in the meaningless orgy of hype, graphical innovations, length of the singleplayer game, and all the features and customizable options that artificially extend otherwise numb gameplay.

A shining example of this is *Fight Night Round 4*. Less a game than an interactive simulation, *Fight Night Round 4* was better and more complete than *Round 3* in every way… except for the actual boxing. *Round 4* looks better, the online feature-set more expansive (same for EA's *MMA*), and the singleplayer experience is much richer. But then you step into ring and the slap fight begins, reminiscent of Jerry

Continued

and Elaine girl-fighting in Seinfeld. Talk about a disconnect between the input/observe relationship. Thank you, but I would rather not have to pause the game and watch it in slow motion to see what the hell I just did. *Fight Night Round 4* is a shining example of a bucket of Hype Machine byproduct poured over a pile of savoury potential, sprinkled with glitter. As my dad has always said, you can't wipe your ass with potential.

Gameplay feedback is meaning. You walk away from a game remembering what it felt like to make the character interact with his world. It's the relationship of input/observe that determines *how* things happen in that world, and it's the 'how' that provides meaning. Without meaning (or the 'how'), a movie would be reduced to moving pictures and observation, a book to words and observation, and a game to navigation and observation.

Jim Hering

Is it wrong that when I received the latest *Medal Of Honor* (PS3), my first action was to play through *MOH: Frontline* again?

Is it wrong that I have absolutely no interest in Kinect or Move or any controls that require me to jump around? (I like learning to use keypad controls/combinations. If I want to play golf by standing and swinging, I'll go and play actual golf!)

Is it wrong that I prefer playing games on my own, me against the gameplay mechanic? Against the designers/programmers?

Is it wrong that even though I've bought *MOH* and *F1 2010* (PS3), and *Wolfenstein* (PC), I'm spending more time playing *Stronghold* and *Sabre Wulf*?

Is it wrong that sandbox gaming doesn't pop my cork? That I prefer a finely crafted linear gameplay experience (*Half-Life 2*)?

Why do I feel so disconnected from the majority of gaming today? I really hope *Portal 2* and the next *Half-Life* instalment will drag me back into 2010. Or I'm going to end up staying in 1985 or 1995.

Phil Lindsay

To be fair, there's plenty of gaming available that isn't focused on online play, or motion control, or open-world environments – it just happens to be less fashionable right now, so your local game retailer won't be pushing it in your face. How about having a trawl through Xbox Live Arcade, the Xbox Live Indie Games channel and the PlayStation Store? If you can't find anything that speaks to you among the broad selection of games on offer digitally, you may be in trouble.



Topic: Skill ceilings in games

If a game doesn't allow for mastery, flow and style then what you've got is basically two people playing against the engine, not each other. The strategy part can only come when the players understand and can use at will any trick, mechanic or tool on command. It's just how they use them that makes it fun.

Of course you can have broken MP games, where the optimum tricks so far outweigh all the other options that all flavour is removed, because why do anything except that one thing?

In terms of SP games that deserve to be mastered, *Trials* and more recently *Pac-Man CE DX* have really raised the bar for me. For MP, well, I know all about the *Street Fighter* series, but would like to hear about other games.

fullspectrum

***Ikaruga* for me. Hours and hours practising level one and I still couldn't get anywhere near the best players (replay function is a god send).**

It's interesting that these are called singleplayer games, but you're still competing against others for high scores and fast times. It's just that what they do can't affect what you're doing.

Like gymnastics, I suppose. You all go one at time, so it's singleplayer in that sense. But your performance is still graded against others for a final ranking.

FentonBailey

Chess. It's awesome. So good, in fact, that they didn't bother including a singleplayer mode.

AJ-D



Phil Lindsay asks: why can't more games be like Valve's *Half-Life 2*?

In response to Mike Watson's problem [**E**220] on the subject of being able to pause a game willy-nilly: for the Xbox 360, at least, such a function already exists. I don't know what the button is called, but it's the big green-and-silver 'X' in the middle of the pad. A quick touch of this button and any game you are playing is instantly suspended. Simples. I already use it frequently, not for dealing with baby poo or whatever the other challenges of parenthood might be, but, for example, pausing to rush and do the washing-up when my girlfriend's just said she's on her way round.

I think it's absolutely right and proper that any such standardisation of functions across games, such as being able to pause at any point, is handled by the console. With emulators, there's always a save-state function that, obviously, works independently of the game code itself. Perhaps Microsoft will be kind enough to introduce that to the next Xbox when it comes out? Being a software developer myself (not in the game industry), I think it highly unlikely there will be any sort of standardisation introduced to the games themselves.

Luca Dumble

This is just a quick response to Jem Duducu [**E**221], who brought up the great point of parents who would love to game, but have little time to do so. He mentioned gaming after the kids were asleep but the volume had to be low. I am in the same boat. The solution is wireless 5.1 headphones. I have been playing like this for years, and there is no going back. In fact, when I have the house to myself (rare), I still use them, because the sound is so much clearer and the experience is that much better.

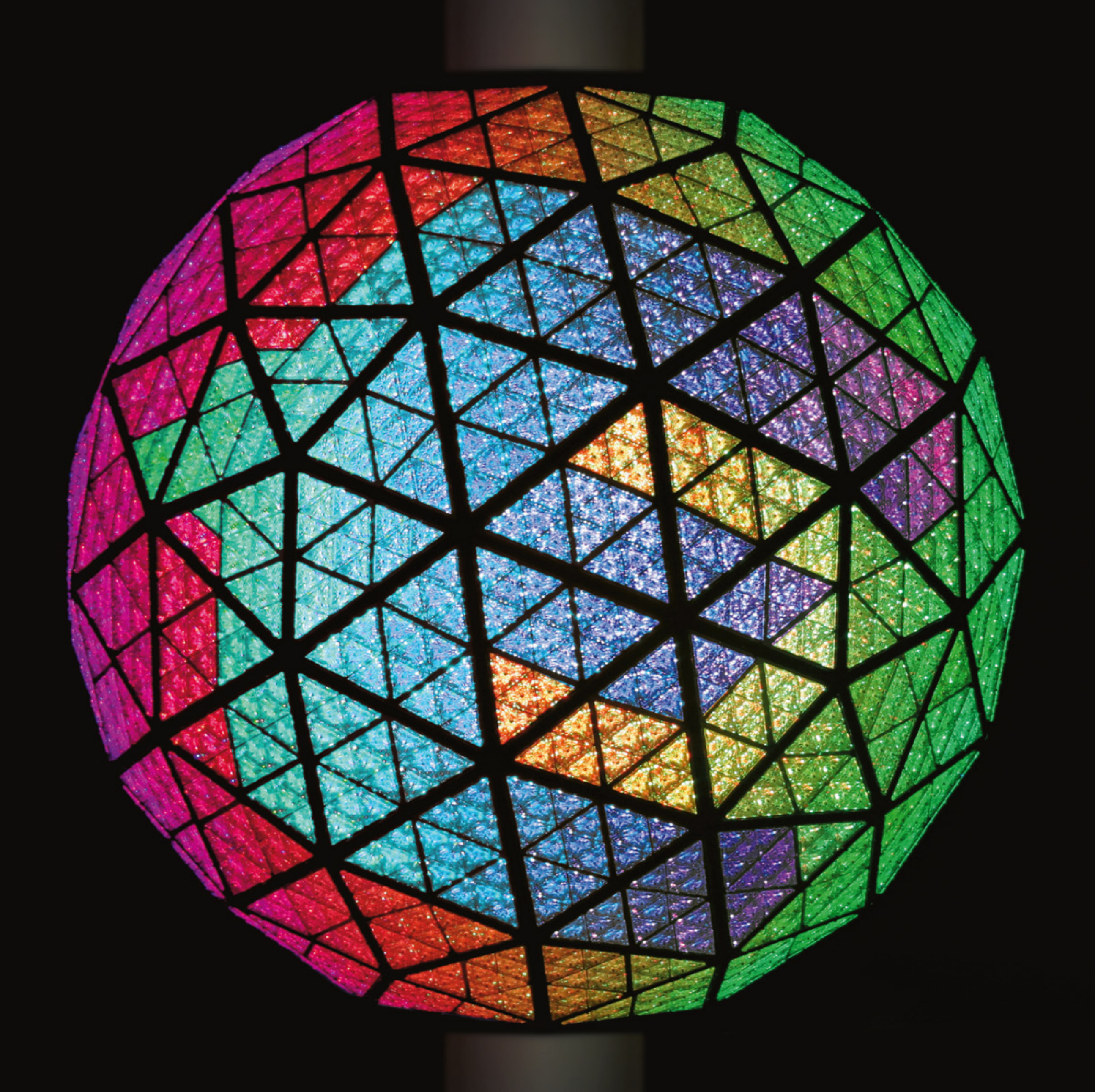
Chris Lee

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